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ABSTRACT

Articles in this publication address the writing process, teaching writing, and research on the teaching of writing, and take the form of personal experience or opinion, or explore the work of others who have contributed to the field. Articles in the first issue of this volume include: "What the Children Convey: On Matters of Time, Talk, and Ebonics" (Anne Haas Dyson); "Ebonics and All That Jazz: Cutting Through the Politics of Linguistics, Education, and Race" (Michele Foster); "What's in a Name? That by Which We Call the Linguistic Consequences of the African Slave Trade" (John Baugh); "Ebonics, or Language as a Class and Status Marker" (Maurice Englander); "Ebonics Ain't the Answer" (Patricia Smith); and "Worth a Thousand Words" (Stephen Marcus). Articles in the second issue include: "Sounding Board: The Writing Teacher as Confidant" (Coleen Armstrong); "Are You All Right Dear? The Writing Teacher as Mother Hen" (Bonnie Faiman); "The 'Righting' Club: Travails and Triumphs of a Community Writing Workshop" (Michael Larkin); "Against All Odds: Implementing a Middle School Writing Club" (Nancy Renko and Mary Weaver); and "Children as Writers in Literature with Annotated Bibliography" (Christina Faccioli). Articles in the third issue include: "The Seven-Year Itch: Politics and Literacy" (Lucia Villarreal); "We Are No Stephen Kings: The Reluctant Road from Coal Miner to Classroom" (Aida Mainella Everhart); "'Otherness' and Other Imponderables: Teaching Hmong Students Academic Writing" (Mark Balhorn and Laurie Meyer); "You Know More Than You Think You Do: A New Look at 'Write What You Know'" (Mark Farrington); "Getting Real: Authenticity in Writing Prompts" (Patricia A. Slagle); and "Surfing the 'Net: A Writing Workshop for Middle School" (Jean Boreen). Articles in the fourth issue include: "The Writing Process Goes to San Quentin" (Jane Juska); "Book Excerpt: Until We Are Strong Together" (Caroline E. Heller); "Should Shay Be Squelched? Striking a Balance between Discipline and Creativity" (Stacy Larson); "Sound and Sense: Grammar, Poetry and Creative Language" (Ray Skjelbred); "Literature as Language: Using Kids' Books To Teach about Words" (Christine Facciolli); "Annotated Bibliography for Kids and Teachers Who Love Words" (Christine Facciolli); and

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WINTER 1997 Volume 19, Number 1

Ebonics: The Children Speak Up

(Page 1)

CS 217 843

CONTENTS

Ebonics: Five Viewpoints

What the Children Convey: On Matters of Time, Talk, and Ebonics 1
Anne Haas Dyson

Ebonics and All That Jazz: Cutting Through the Politics of Linguistics, Education, and Race 7
Michele Foster

What's in a Name? That by Which We Call the Linguistic Consequences of the African Slave Trade 9
John Baugh

Ebonics, or Language as a Class and Status Marker 13
Maurice Englander

Ebonics Ain't the Answer 15
Patricia Smith

Writing and Community

The Red and Black 18
Laurie Bottoms

Book Excerpt

Meeting the Challenges: Stories from Today's Classrooms 20
Maureen Barbieri and Carol Tateishi, Eds.

Cover photo and photos on pages 4 and 8 by Elizabeth Crews.

Technology

Worth a Thousand Words 26
Stephen Marcus

In Memoriam: James Moffett, 1929-1996

James Moffett: An Appreciation 33
Jim Gray

Co-Authoring with James Moffett 35
Betty Jane Wagner

The Quarterly
OF THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT

WINTER 1997 Volume 19, Number 1

What the Children Convey:

On Matters of Time, Talk, and Ebonics

by

ANNE HAAS DYSON

◆

A small group of East Bay first graders is discussing the relative size of varied creatures and objects — including God. Among the children are Jameel and Monique, both African American, and Berto, who is Latino. Following is a small excerpt from their talk.

> Jameel: But what about God. He's bigger than everything.
> Berto: No he isn't. (and then more loudly) He AIN'T BIGGER THAN EVERYTHING.
> Monique: You don't know.
> . . .*
> Berto: He's not bigger than Jesus.
> Jameel: Jesus his son.
> Berto: His baby.
> Jameel: Son.
> Berto: Baby.
> Jameel: Son.
> . . .
> Berto: Daughter!
> Monique: Son. Son. He really son. Uh huh. He's the son. He is.

Jameel, Monique, and Berto are skillful language users, vigorous discussants, successful literacy learners — and speakers of "nonstandard" varieties of English. Although the transcript does not record their ways of pronouncing words, it does show that Berto's lexical (vocabulary) choices include "ain't" and that Jameel and Monique's syntactic (or word arrangement) options allow them to delete, rather than only contract, forms of the verb *to be*. For example, in the last line of the transcript, Monique moves from calmly pointing out that "he really son," to more pointedly (and urgently) saying "He's the son. He *is*." Matters of religion can get children, like adults, quite worked up!

**denotes omitted data*

It is hard to reconcile the complexity and fluidity of the children's talk with the confusing public discussion surrounding the Oakland School Board's public stand (also confusing) on the language of many African Americans. In that discussion, children like Jameel and Monique seldom are represented as skillful users of a complex linguistic system, or as creative and clever speakers, capable of continually learning new ways with words in and out of school. There have been few references to the impact of Ebonics, or African American Vernacular English (A.A.V.E.), on the common culture, nor its literary use by honored artists like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. Indeed many of our great artists have told American stories steeped in this country's powerful, vivid, and nonstandard vernaculars (spoken varieties of English); included among these artists are white men from the American literary canon like Twain and Steinbeck.

The initial reaction to the Oakland Board's policy yielded public descriptions of many African American children's language (which is also the language shared with their families) as "street talk," "slang," and even "garbage."

The initial reaction to the Oakland Board's policy yielded public descriptions of many African American children's language (which is also the language shared with their families) as "street talk," "slang," and even "garbage." The State Superintendent of Public Instruction said that "it was a mistake to convey to kids that there is an appropriate time for this language" (*The Examiner*, December 29, 1996). And many high school students seemed simply at a loss. "We are like lab rats," said one exasperated student (*Oakland Tribune*, December 20, 1996). "At a white school, you don't see them talking about White English ... Do I seem like I'm speaking another language? They're pinpointing the smallest thing. It ain't no big thing."

The central issue in the public commentary did not seem to be *if* children should graduate from public school able to use "Standard English." There was, to my knowledge, no one who disputed this as a goal. The issues seemed to be, what kind of a thing is "ain't no big thing," so to speak? What should teachers "convey to kids" about language? And what does African American vernacular have to do with learning to read and write?

There are many accessible books on these issues, since they are not new ones — although, clearly, they are hardly passe. Among such books are Geneva Smitherman's (1977/1986) *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*, the National Council of Teachers of English collection *Tapping Potential: English and Language Arts for the Black Learner*, edited by Charlotte Brooks (1984), and Lisa Delpit's (1995) more recent *Other People's Children*.

In this article, I write from the perspective of a literacy educator and researcher who has spent many years listening closely to children in Berkeley and Oakland primary schools. I hope to contribute to the public discussion by drawing attention to the voices of young children, their power and potential as learners of oral and written language, and some of the ways in which that power can be squandered. In addition, I aim to raise some concern about a demographic group whose linguistic sophistication has not figured in the public discussion to date — the children whose home language is a version of so-called Standard English. I begin, however, with a Berkeley classroom in which the notion of language differences is discussed in a strikingly straightforward way.

On Dep O's and Deep Ones:
Why "Ain't No" May Be a Big Thing

Concerns about a "standard" English are, to some extent, about having a common written English (including spelling and word order), despite the varied vernaculars of this country's regions and social groups, not to mention those of the many nations that include English as one of their languages. But those concerns are not only nor even mainly about ease of communication. They are about "standards" and the *power* to set them and, also, to meet them, about being judged acceptable by society's gatekeepers, those who control access to colleges, universities, and employment opportunities. "Ain't" is not less clear than "isn't," but its social reverberations are different. And this is why people are so intense, emotional, and ambivalent about some of the children's ways with words. I say this as one who, as a 10-year-old, became the "ain't" police officer in my own family — an ill-fated career move. My sisters, like reasonable people everywhere, resisted arbitrary authority and linguistic arrogance; their "ain'ts" multiplied like the Biblical loaves.

Disrespectful attitudes interfere with children's literacy learning much more than does nonstandard speech in and of itself.

Given the strong emotions that surround language differences, it is quite remarkable that, in Rita Davies' East Bay classroom, first graders who themselves speak varied versions of English often discuss language differences quite directly. They point out word pronunciations that strike them as different — and "Miss Rita" points them out as well, explaining that those different pronunciations have a common English spelling. For example, while discussing with her children their thank you letters to the folks at Berkeley's Depot for Creative Re-Use, Rita wrote the name of this recycling center on the board and then commented:

> Ms. Rita: This [Depot] is a funny word, isn't it? It looks like "de pot," doesn't it? But we don't pronounce the *t*, and we say "de po." Actually, ... we say "dep o" ... but here you say "de po."
>
> Erin: What if I went home and said to my mom, "We're going to the dep o!" (much delight as children turn to each other and play with the sound of "deep" O's and "dep" O's).

Moreover, when Rita orally reads a sentence, making small changes in the sentence's grammar — as we all do when we read something new and slip into our usual ways with words — she points out that an idea may be expressed differently in different kinds of English, even though books written in America usually "say it" in a particular way. And in reading to her children, she has been heard to comment that the people in a book talk in ways that make her think they might be from her home place.

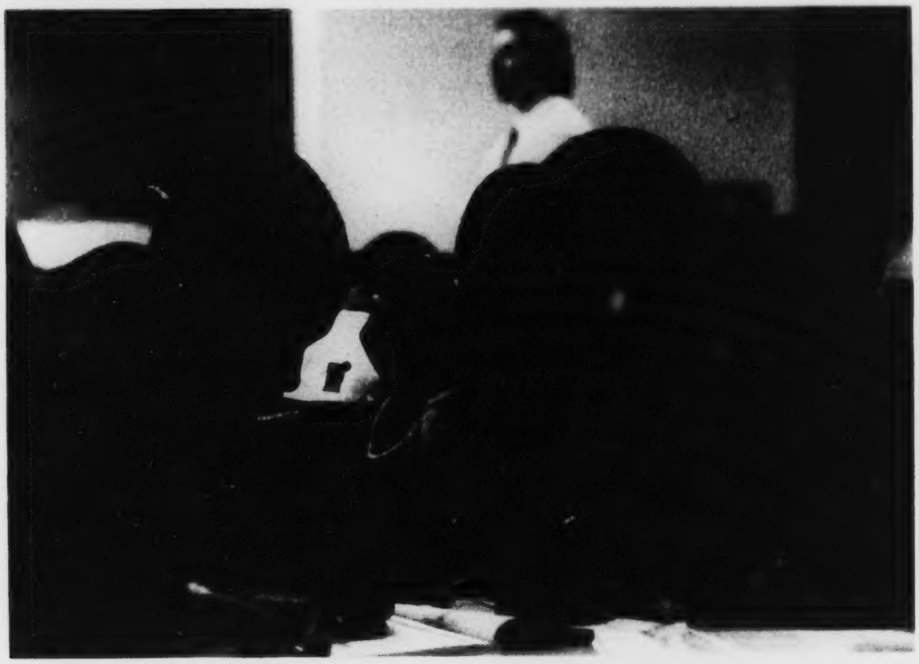
Rita's straightforward, nonpatronizing attitude is just the stance that teachers *should* have during literacy lessons for young children, or so say most professional educators, including those previously referenced. But her attitude sharply contrasts the emotional turmoil — which is a substitute for the usual uncomfortable silence — that has accompanied the issue of language differences in the Bay Area. How can this be?

Rita is an experienced and skilled teacher ... and she has a secret classroom ingredient — her candor about her own linguistic and cultural difference. This candor would cause no alarm among the many passionate participants in the discussion about the Oakland language policy statement. And this is because Rita was born in England; her home language (i.e., the variety of English she uses) is not stigmatized in a way that denies its speakers' intelligence nor the authenticity of its history. Rather it is regarded as an important part of the complex story of English and of our own country.

Attitudes toward varieties of English reflect the history of power relationships in a particular society. Varieties of American English that are associated with the working class and with ethnic and racial minorities are considered "nonstandard" and less prestigious, despite the fact that linguists consider them as complex and complete as varieties considered "standard." Educators and other adults might judge children who speak nonstandard English as "unintelligent" or "unlikely to do well in language arts." In fact, adults might "hear" nonstandard forms spoken by children of color, even when the children do not use them (Williams, Hopper, Natalicio, 1977; more recently, attitudes toward children's storytelling have been studied — see Cazden, 1988, and, for discussion, Delpit, 1995). These disrespectful attitudes interfere with children's literacy learning much more than does nonstandard speech in and of itself.

Listening Anew to the Children: The Seeds of Linguistic and Literary Power

Jameel and Monique's home language linked them to the complex historical, social, and political processes of language use and change. Some of their language forms, like double negatives, are found in many varieties of English all over the globe (and were acceptable in Shakespeare's England). Other forms are particular to A.A:V.E. and reflect its own unique origins. *Ain't* as a substitute for *isn't* is very common in English varieties, but *ain't* for *didn't* seems to be particular to A.A.V.E; the linking of multiple negatives (not just two) to express strong negation also seems particular to A.A.V.E.



Further, like all of us, Jameel and Monique speak more formally or less, depending on the situation — and middle-class African American professionals may control a wider range of styles than do most other Americans (Whatley, 1981). In first grade, when I knew them, Jameel and Monique were not from socioeconomically middle-class homes, and, like all 6-year-olds, they were still developing the patterns of their home language; but they had the language flexibility and sensitivity necessary to learn to control their speech styles.

For example, when Jameel was teaching others (including me) about class lessons, he appropriated the language (i.e., the vocabulary and phrasing) of his teacher Louise Rosenkrantz, another skilled Bay Area educator. Here is Jameel explaining a picture of a strange bird to me; he uses both the language of science and of metaphor, which may be particularly strong among children of African American cultural heritage (Scott, 1990; Smitherman, 1977).

> Jameel: This bird is very interesting.... This is a crocodile bird that cleans out the little stuff stuck up in his (the crocodile's) teeth. The crocodiles will never eat him. They will never eat their dentist! (turns page) ... Now this is a duck. It's a member of the duck family. (Dyson, 1993, p. 126)

When children have the opportunity, as they do in Louise's and Rita's classes, to use language for many different purposes — to discuss with their peers, to tell stories, to teach — they reveal the language power that the most sophisticated literary artists exploit. Consider, for example, a book that is a favorite among many Bay Area children I know, Eloise Greenfield's *Honey I Love* (1978). Her poem about Harriet Tubman begins this way:

> Harriet Tubman didn't take no stuff
> Wasn't scared of nothing neither
> Didn't come in this world to be no slave
> And wasn't going to stay one either

Greenfield could have written, "Harriet Tubman didn't take any stuff / Wasn't scared of anything either"— but those lines do not mean the same thing. They are not as forceful, nor as particular to the African American experience. After all, Greenfield was not writing an essay about, or biography of, Harriet Tubman; she was using the sound and sense of the language to convey aesthetically Tubman's strength. On the other hand, in another poem, Greenfield used the familiar (and quite "standard") cadence of somebody "doesn't live here anymore" to convey a little sister's gentle indignation:

> It's summertime
> And Reggie doesn't live here anymore
> He lives across the street
> Spends his time with the round ball

Jump, turn, shoot
Through the hoop
Thinks he's Kareem
And not my brother

Taking a long view, then, the overriding goal for language education throughout the school years should not be the mastery of any one genre or language variety but the capacity to negotiate among contexts, to be socially and politically astute in discourse use.

Clarifying Teaching Goals: Reading, Writing, and Speaking

As I understand the public commentary, one reason educators and the public might reject flexibility as a goal and, instead, convey that there is no time and no place for any voice but a "standard" one is a fear that children who speak nonstandard dialects cannot learn to read. But this is simply not true (Piestrup, 1973; Sims, 1982; Simons & Johnson, 1974).

Taking a long view, then, the overriding goal for language education throughout the school years should not be the mastery of any one genre or language variety but the capacity to negotiate among contexts, to be socially and politically astute in discourse use.

Jameel and Monique, for example, both became good readers and writers in first grade ... although, it *is* true that A.A.V.E. *potentially* could have interfered with their learning. In learning to read and write, young children must pay close attention to how their oral words yield a written message, and vice versa. Confusion can result if teachers ask children to pronounce words and, then, "listen real hard" for sounds that they simply do not pronounce (e.g., the *d* in "old," and other final sounds in words ending in consonant clusters). Similarly, teachers might continuously interrupt children as they read, attempting to teach "pronunciation" instead of "reading" (the ability to make sense of written codes) — another confusing "instructional" strategy that teaches children not to trust their own good language sense. Moreover, Jameel, Monique, and their peers might have increased their use of nonstandard patterns, rather then adopting a more standard speech in the official school world, if their teacher had constantly corrected their speech, which is different from straightforwardly discussing differences in phonics lessons and, as children progress, in editing sessions for writing.

Even the "translation" method (i.e., the deliberate comparison of "home language" and "standard English" forms) has its limits. Sometimes children's oral reading (and writing) errors are not evidence of their home language patterns at all but, rather, of their efforts to control English in new ways (Scott, 1992). For example, children who, when speaking, tend not to use the -s ending on third person singular verbs (e.g., "He get") may, when reading, overuse the *s* (e.g., "You gets..."). The frustration for both teachers and children caused by well-intentioned but ill-fated "instructional" strategies were vividly captured years ago by Ann Piestrup (1973), in her study of "Black Dialect Interference and Accommodation in Reading Instruction in First Grade"— a study completed in the Bay Area. In her words:

> *Efforts to find deficits in children or to focus on their language differences may only confound the problems of negative teacher expectations and evade the problem of functional conflict between teachers and children with different cultural backgrounds. Teachers can alienate children from learning by subtly rejecting their Black speech. They can discourage them by implying ... that the children lack potential.... Teachers can also involve children in learning to read in a way that capitalizes on their lively speech. They can deal with confusion as it arises without dwelling on language differences. This requires the kind of attentiveness shown by the Black Artful teachers* [the name Piestrup gave to teachers] *who seemed to thoroughly understand their Black students, and to have no difficulty teaching them to read.* (Piestrup, 1973, p. 170)

The Need for Times and Places for Talk about Talk

To me, as an academic in language and literacy, a former urban first grade teacher (and a child-sized "ain't" police officer), the public dialogue of the last month has been a stark display of limits. First, it has made clear the limits of the university as a community intellectual center, as a place for educational talk about talk. These issues about children's language differences and literacy learning are hardly new. And yet, a public call for teacher respect for, and knowledge about, children's language provoked a public outcry; and in both call and outcry, nonstandard language and illiteracy often seemed conflated. "Old" ideas about language differences and literacy (like Piestrup's) are found in thick monographs on library shelves and in linguistic courses for those privileged to attend universities. (President Clinton, who seems in the mood lately for giving the nation literacy homework, might assign us all to watch again PBS's series on *The Story of English*.)

School dialogues about difficult, emotion-filled issues are not easy — but they are indispensable .

Moreover, teacher education programs (even local ones) do not necessarily help students become knowledgeable about these issues. New teachers, anxious to learn how to keep order and structure a reading lesson, need guidance in learning that a too-secret ingredient for teaching success is an awareness of how they themselves figure into our complex world of dynamic but different cultures, voices, and accesses to power.

In this publication of the National Writing Project, it seems reasonable to call attention to the urgent need for public schools themselves to become sites for faculty and community discussion. Information can and should be sought from language specialists, but, in the end, teachers have to be familiar with the particular languages of the children in their own schools. Moreover, only parents and community members can explain their concerns and hopes for their own children, and only teachers can reflect with each other on their particular frustrations and successes in fulfilling those hopes and addressing those concerns. As Linda Rogers, another fine Bay Area first grade teacher, points out to me again and again, school dialogues about difficult, emotion-filled issues are not easy — but they are indispensable (Dyson and the East Bay Teacher Study Group, 1997).

Second, the public commentary has also revealed the limits of framing talk about language differences as if it were an issue only for "some" of our children. No where in the commentary has there been any concern voiced for children growing up speaking a version of standard English — children who are surely making their own interpretations of the adults' dialogue. Popular radio "call-in" shows display the many accents and dialects of our nation (MacNeil, 1995). What sort of democracy can we have if children learn to dismiss some voices out of hand (and out of mind)? How can children understand our history, our current social struggles, our literature without an appreciation of our changing languages? How prepared will our children be for participation in an emerging world order in which there are increasing varieties of English around the globe?

In her first poem in the book *Honey, I Love*, Eloise Greenfield's narrator, a young girl, talks about her pleasure in listening to her cousin talk:

> Cause every word he says just kind of slides out of his mouth
> I like the way he whistles and I like the way he walks
> But honey, let me tell you that I LOVE the way he talks
> I love the way my cousin talks

Now, in this month of Black History, of Brotherhood and Sisterhood, it would be a fine teaching goal to promote, in all our children, this sort of pleasure in words, this sort of appreciation for the rhythms of our own, and our cousins', ways with words.

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continued on page 12

Ebonics and All That Jazz:

Cutting Through the Politics of Linguistics, Education, and Race

by

MICHELE FOSTER

◆

Minutes after the Oakland School Board passed its resolution acknowledging Ebonics as the primary language of the majority of its African American students and vowing to take it into account in instruction, a media frenzy began. As the days and weeks passed, it became clear that everyone, informed or not, had a point of view about the Oakland School Board's decision. Politicians, economists, ministers, and writers offered their opinions. And as some have commented, although everyone has a right to an opinion, not everyone's opinion is right. Reading the articles, editorials, op-ed pieces, and letters to the editor in newspapers and magazines, and listening to the remarks and often vitriolic commentaries on various radio programs, I concluded that most pundits had already decided what they believed; they were saying, "Don't confuse me with the facts, I've already made up my mind." And they wouldn't change their minds even if they were presented with the linguistic facts, because the controversy over Ebonics is about more than language; it is about politics.

In this article I'll begin by reviewing the linguistic history of Ebonics, pointing out the valuable yet often misunderstood resources of this language variety. Next I'll discuss several successful instructional approaches for promoting facility with standard American English while honoring the rich language tradition of Ebonics, and I'll conclude with a reflection on the complex politics surrounding this issue.

Linguistically Speaking...

A number of little-known linguistic facts are pertinent to the school board action. Ebonics, more commonly known in the research literature as Black English or African American English, isn't, as Jacob Heilbrunn claimed in an article in *The New Republic* (January 20, 1997), something cooked up by a group of Afrocentric academics. In fact, observers of 18th and 19th century American life noted the existence of Black English. And frequently, as in the contemporary case, racist cartoons often portrayed Blacks speaking African American English in order to depict them as unlettered and ignorant.

Today most linguists accept the idea that African American English, as well as other African New World varieties such as those spoken in Jamaica, Barbados, and Haiti, originated during the period of European colonial expansion, first developing as a pidgin and later as a creole language. A pidgin is a speech system developed to facilitate communication between two groups that do not share a common language. A pidgin does not have native speakers; rather it is learned as a second language for specific purposes. When a second generation learns a pidgin as a native language, it becomes a creole. For many years white dialectologists refused to acknowledge the African influences on African American English, arguing instead that African American English was merely a poor imitation of the language spoken by British

white colonists from East Anglia. However, in 1949 when Lorenzo Dow Turner published his study *Africanisms in Gullah Dialect* (a variety spoken in the Sea Islands, off the coast of Charleston) and documented the fact that there were 6000 Africanisms in the language, it became difficult to maintain that there was no African influence on the language spoken by Blacks in the United States. As with the case of the origin of African American English, most linguists also acknowledge that there is a continuum of Black English varieties that run from Krio of Sierra Leone, to Gullah, to the present African American English.

I use the term "varieties" because the terms "dialect" and "language" are imprecise and politically laden. Laypeople usually make distinctions between a dialect and a language, the former usually being understood as inferior to a language. Laypeople, moreover, often call two varieties that are mutually intelligible "dialects." However, the linguistic distinction between a language and a dialect isn't that neat. Mandarin and Cantonese are not mutually intelligible, but they are called dialects of Chinese. On the other hand, Norwegian and Swedish, although mutually intelligible, are called languages. The truth is that the designations applied to different varieties are a matter of social practice that often have more to do with power and politics than with any inherent characteristics of the varieties themselves. The linguist Max Weinrich commented that a language is a dialect backed by an army and a navy. For this reason, I prefer the term "variety" because it is more neutral, less politically charged, and less value laden.

Linguists have conducted research on African American English for over 30 years. They have documented the fact that like other varieties of English, African American English is rule governed and systematic. Children learn these patterns from their parents in the context of the community in which they are born. African American English is the primary variety of working class African Americans, but it is also spoken by many middle class African Americans who are bidialectal. A social dialect, a variety spoken by a particular social or ethnic group, African American English traveled northward and westward as Blacks migrated to regions of the country outside of the south and, consequently, may vary according to region. As with any dialect, African American English has unique grammatical characteristics and unique pronunciations. Thus, when African American students pronounce the initial /th/ in *then* as *den*, or the final /th/ in *with* as *wif*; when an African American student asks, "Can I *axe* a question"; or when an African American student says , "My sister *be* working" to indicate that her sister works every day, or "She mad" to denote that someone is mad at the moment but is not usually mad, they are all adhering to the pronunciation and grammatical rules of African American English. So when Walter Williams, a conservative African Ameri-

continued on p. 10

What's in a Name?

That by Which We Call the Linguistic Consequences of the African Slave Trade

by JOHN BAUGH

The term Ebonics was coined by Robert Williams, a black psychologist, in 1973 at a conference that he hosted at Washington University in St. Louis. During his January 23, 1997 testimony before the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, Williams stated:

"A group of Black scholars and myself argued that we needed to define the language spoken by many Blacks rather than let others define it for us. At that conference I combined two terms: 1) EBONY, meaning black and 2) PHONICS, meaning the science of speech sounds to form the term Ebonics. In 1975, I published a book entitled: *Ebonics: The True Language of Black Folks.*

"Ebonics has two major dimensions as a language:
1) A lexicon or the vocabulary of the language.
2) Morphology or the study of the structure and form of the language that include its grammatical rules.

"EBONICS may be defined as the linguistic and paralinguistic features which on a concentric continuum represent the communicative competence of the West African, Caribbean, and United States slave descendants of African origin. It includes the grammar, various idioms, patois, argots, ideolects, and social dialects of Black people." (Williams, 1975, p. VI, quoted from his Senate testimony.)

African American vernacular English is unquestionably a dialect of English, albeit one that is not standard; statements to the contrary are linguistically uninformed. However, I know of no professional linguist who would diminish the unique linguistic heritage of American slave descendants in comparison to all other U.S. immigrants. Whereas the typical European immigrant may have come to the United in poverty speaking a language other than English, they were not enslaved captives who were isolated from speakers of their native language, nor were they denied access to education and literacy by law. By striking contrast, slaves were immediately segregated from other speakers of their native language by their captors to prevent uprisings. The typical European immigrant also obtained legal rights under the law, whereas slaves and many of their descendants could not seek legal relief through the courts.

These unique historical circumstances are profound, and belie the pervasive linguistic ignorance that has been displayed in response to Oakland's efforts to teach standard English to many of their African American students. Black English is not simply "bad English," nor can it be dismissed as mere slang. Linguistic research by many of the leading black and white scholars in the field clearly demonstrate systematic and rule governed linguistic patterns that differ considerably from the prescriptive standard English norms that are essential to full participation in any professional arena.

Thus, while I take considerable exception to any interpretation of "Ebonics" as a language other than English, I commend the efforts of educators who acknowledge the unique linguistic consequences of slavery in pedagogy that intends to foster mastery of standard American English.

John Baugh writes "in three capacities: as a professor of linguistics and education, as a former director of Stanford's teacher education program, and as a black person who attended inner-city public schools in Philadelphia and Los Angeles as a child."

Ebonics and All That Jazz

continued from p.8

can economist, writes, "Today I be writing this article" to parody African American English in a Boston Globe op-ed piece, he is breaking the rules of the variety he sought to ridicule.

But many laypeople don't realize that in addition to the unique grammar and pronunciations most often associated with African American English, this variety also has particular prosodic and rhetorical features. Prosody includes variation in pitch, intonation, pace, volume, stress, and vowel length. Rhetorical strategies are the devices speakers use to structure discourse or talk; these include repetition, alliteration, metaphor, and other creative uses of language. In fact, the prosodic and rhetorical features of African American English can be heard in the speech of educated African Americans like Martin Luther King, Jr., Johnetta Cole, Cornel West, Eleanor Holmes Norton, Maya Angelou and Jesse Jackson. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* speech has the cadence, rhythms, metaphors, and analogies that characterize the rhetorical styles of many African Americans. King's expanded metaphor of the bank of justice being bankrupt and having insufficient funds to honor African American's demands for freedom and justice is one example. He also uses repetition with variation in several places in his speech, finally rising to a crescendo at the end when he proclaims:

> *So let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania. Let freedom ring from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado. Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California. But not only that. Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia...*

And when Jesse Jackson intones, "It's not your aptitude, but your attitude that determines your altitude," he is employing repetition, alliteration, rhythm, and rhyme — several of the elements characteristic of a Black discourse style. Finally, although the media rarely mentions the fact, African American English has made major contributions to the lexicon of American English with words — *jazz, yam, tote* and *funky* — as well as expressions — *bad-mouth, jam session,* and *have a ball* — that have all enriched American English. Regardless of what some may think about African American English, it is not substandard or deficient, nor does it in and of itself interfere with students' cognitive abilities, as some extremists have claimed.

Old Wine in New Bottles?:
Instructional Approaches & Possibilities

The Oakland School Board's decision to help teachers learn about the structure of African American English in order to teach students better is not a radical proposal. In fact, their proposal is similar to the 1979 decision issued by a federal judge in The Black English Case, *Martin Luther King vs. Ann Arbor School District.* Judge Joiner ordered the school district to take Black English into account when teaching African American students the language of the school, commerce, and the marketplace.

Several school districts already use contrastive analysis to help students learn to translate their home speech into school speech. Using a contrastive analysis approach a teacher might query, "Where I'm at? African American English or Standard English?" and the student would respond, "African American English" and provide the Standard English equivalent "Where am I?" Such an approach is currently being used in several California School Districts and in elementary schools in DeKalb County, Georgia. Taught to intermediate grade students, Dekalb's "Bidialectal Communication Program" has been in operation for a decade. The National Council for Teachers of English has designated the Dekalb program a center of excellence and last year the students enrolled in it made gains on standardized tests of verbal achievement. An instructor who teaches a broadcast-speech class at Columbia College in Chicago has also used the contrastive analysis approach with her classes that include a number of African American students. Using contrastive analysis will not harm students; at the very least it will increase their metalinguistic awareness. However, there are other approaches that may be even more instructionally powerful.

When I lived in North Carolina, I visited an elementary school whose principal and faculty had adopted an approach similar to that used by the instructor at Columbia College. Each week the fourth and fifth grade classes produced, wrote, and staged a news program that was broadcast to the entire school and taped for future analysis. The idea behind this curricular program was to provide students with an authentic social and speech context in which to use more mainstream forms of English. Before producing their news program, the students watched and analyzed newscasts and discussed the variety of language used by the news anchors; students visited local television stations to learn what was entailed in producing a news show, and several local news anchors visited the classrooms to talk with students.

> ***When I began teaching in all-black urban classrooms, I instinctively drew upon the rich verbal traditions of the African American community.***

When I taught African American English speaking students developmental writing and English composition, I explicitly pointed out the differences between the grammars of African American English and Standard American Written English. We reviewed and practiced finding these grammatical differences until students could detect them and transform them on their own. But I also combined the dynamic, creative and artistic aspects of African American English evident in African American preaching styles, in the verbal art of African American males and adolescents, and in the stories and playsongs of African American children with more static and structured grammar instruction. These two aspects of language were blended into a satisfactory mélange of pedagogical techniques that I now employ and constantly reshape in my classrooms.

When I began teaching in all-black urban classrooms, I instinctively drew upon the rich verbal traditions of the African American community. For instance, my recognition of the salience of public performance and the rich oral tradition of the African American community inspired me to include multiple opportunities for students to read their work out loud and to hear their own work, as well as that of others, read aloud. Moreover, I also insisted that whoever was reading do so with "expression." Over the years, I have found that reading in this way has helped students extract more meaning from the text because the prosodic features of stress, pitch, and intonation provide cues beyond those available from the text alone. Out loud readings introduce students at all levels to unfamiliar vocabulary, unusual sentence constructions, new discourse features, and different patterns of organization. Reading aloud helps students hear sentences that are unclear, tangled and just plain don't make sense. Reading aloud helps students whose first variety is African American English to hear where the syntax needs to be transformed in order to conform to the conventions of standard American written English. I have also tried to show African American students at all levels of schooling how various sentence elements can be manipulated to mimic the prosodic features in their speech, something I worked hard to teach myself when I was a graduate student trying to find my voice and a distinctive writing style.

Most of these approaches focus on the word- or sentence-level characteristics of a particular variety. But additionally, instructional strategies need to be developed which turn students' attention to the dynamic and creative aspects of language use in African American communities, nurturing the rhetorical and discourse features — evident in the oratorical styles of King and Jackson — that I believe show the greatest promise of promoting the highest levels of literacy among African American youth.

The Politics of Ebonics

The controversy surrounding Ebonics is as much about the politics of education, the politics of race, and their intersection as it is about linguistics. A recent editorial in *The Wall Street Journal (January* 1997) assailed the Oakland School Board decision, calling it just another academic fad like whole language and constructivist mathematics. And the Georgia Legislature and California Assembly recently introduced legislation to ban using African American English in school districts.

But in my view, the reason that African American English has drawn such fire is not because it is inferior, but because it is spoken by Black people. The Linguistic Society of America has adopted a resolution and numerous books have been published that unequivocally demonstrate that African American English is not slang, nor is it broken English, nor is it inferior to standard English, but a variety with its own history, rules of grammar, discourse practices and rich oral literature that is worthy of respect. Nonetheless, many people still refuse to accept this, because this would mean accepting the humanity and integrity of a people that America has denied from its inception. Racist diehards have seized upon the Oakland decision as just another opportunity to disparage and deride African Americans, this time under the cloak of linguistics. Thus, while I believe it is important for African American students to become proficient in Standard English, I am not naive enough to believe that this will end discrimination, prejudice, and injustice.

In a provocative essay published almost thirty years ago, James Baldwin wrote:

> *The brutal truth is that the bulk of white people in America never had any interest in educating black people, except as this could serve white purposes. It is not the black child's language that is in question, it is not his language that is despised: it is his experience. A child cannot be taught by anyone who despises him, and a child cannot afford to be fooled. A child cannot be taught by anyone whose demand, essentially, is that the child repudiate his experience, and all that gives sustenance, and enter a limbo in which he will no longer be black and in which he knows that he can never become white. Black people have lost too many black children that way.*

Still applicable today, these words sum up the underlying intent of the Oakland School Board's decision. Against great odds and extreme bigotry, the Oakland School Board is trying to advance a different and more positive view about African American pupils, a view that honors their intelligence, linguistic abilities, and cultural integrity. For this they are to be commended.

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continued from page 6

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Ebonics, or Language as a Class and Status Marker

by

MAURICE ENGLANDER

◆

The controversy over the Oakland School Board's attempt to improve instruction for the many African American children who enter the public schools speaking nonstandard English has been most revealing of conflicting attitudes toward race, class, language, and the public schools.

The first fact to note is that no child is responsible for the color of his skin, the language he speaks, his economic status, or the culture he inherits. These are givens. The second is that the public schools and the teacher's first duty is to accept and respect him as he is, from the first moment he steps onto the school grounds.

If he speaks a nonstandard form of English, he is not to be made to feel ashamed or inferior or inadequate on that account. Simply put, it's profoundly immoral for the school or the teacher to suggest that how a youngster speaks is "wrong," or to suggest he's been improperly taught by his parents. To make a youngster feel ashamed of his parents or of himself for the English he uses is unforgivable. The only important question about his language is this: can he say what he needs to say and be understood by the person he's speaking with? The issue is communication — it's adequacy or inadequacy — and nothing else matters at that point of contact with persons outside the home. In time, he will acquire the skills he perceives to be of benefit to himself, but only if and when they can be shown to advantage, more than disadvantage, him.

Further fact: there is no such thing as "correct" or "incorrect" English. Such absurd notions were killed off years ago by those who developed the discipline known as *linguistics*. There is really no such thing as one "standard" English; there are many forms of it, depending upon the degree to which they vary from some fairly arbitrary practices and conventions of English as used and understood by other groups of users of the same language. And every user of a language — any language — modifies the conventions to a greater or lesser degree because no two users can employ language in precisely the same way.

Ebonics (for Black English) is simply a coined word referring to a number of dialectal forms of English both spoken and understood by African Americans without their having to make a special study of them. The several dialects covered by the term evolved over a period of years from native African languages in association with several dialects of English spoken by the earlier English settlers and slave owners. Black English began as a spoken language and has largely remained so to this day.

Further fact: all those who would read and write English well, standard or not, must invest a certain amount of time learning those conventions of the spoken and written language used by most speakers and writers at any given time — in both formal and informal settings. Understandably, those who have invested large amounts of energy and diligence learning the conventions prescribed by language mannerists are most inclined to support and defend their expenditures.

Hence, the rush of the likes of Maya Angelou, Ishmael Reed, Jesse Jackson and others to condemn the Oakland Board for its attempts to find untried ways to teach the conventions to those who have been slow, or reluctant, to learn them.

Adepts at a learned language tend to frown upon those who are content to get by speaking the mother tongue, burrs and all. Linguistic snobbery is forever with us.

If the Oakland Board is attempting to get teachers to teach African American youngsters the hows and the whys of their first language, then teachers must make a study of Black English themselves, if they don't already know it. Such a requirement should be considered no different from that of a math teacher to learn math before attempting to teach it, because one can't readily teach anything of which one is ignorant, including the history and development of the conventions of the English language. These are in constant change and evolution — old conventions yielding to new: Middle English *briddes* for *birds*, and *thrid* for *third*; the current pronunciation of *off-un* for *off-ten*, even as we retain the unpronounced *t* in the spelling of the word. And, who knows, eventually *aks* for *ask*?

What is remarkable in the negative responses to the Oakland Board's intentions is the underlying racism that always surfaces when African Americans demand their place in the sun. Those who believe that Blacks are inferior to Whites — and their legions are many—abhor the inventiveness of the "underclasses," particularly their forms of dress, speech, hairstyles, musics and the like. *Slang*, or "street talk," as some would term it, is the name given to newly-coined words, or new usages for old words, before they make their way into respectable use — by those who consider themselves superior to the inventors of it. Who doesn't write and say *okay* by now or use the slang word *jazz* in thoroughly ordinary speech and writing?

Unfortunately, the Oakland Board has been slow to clarify its intentions. If the path to higher education and better-paying jobs lies through a mastery of the confusing and conflicting conventions of what some term "standard English," then African Americans, a numerical minority in the country, have little choice but to learn the language manners of the dominant social, economic, and political classes — these gatekeepers to the avenues of success in the dominant culture.

Nothing very positive can be forthcoming from those who would destroy the public schools by underfunding, then fleeing them, then condemning them for trying to educate all the children of all the people, or from those who assert their own class and racial superiority to African Americans by denigrating their language and achievements — among which have been the development of some truly remarkable survival strategies, from those who take a sinful pride in their learning, considering themselves virtuous for having acquired special knowledges and skills, however, subsequently, they choose to use them. Virtue lies in deeds, not words.

No man or woman is superior to another based upon his or her pronunciation of the word *tomato* or his spelling of the word *potato*, but try selling that proposition to the language police. The School Board is on the right track, however awkwardly it's tried to explain its adoption of a new, and necessary, policy. If the old ways didn't work, it's time to try something different, beginning with respect for a people who've had to fight every inch of the way for whatever advancements the dominant white cultures have grudgingly granted them. The least the rest of us can do is cut the Oakland schools some slack to try new approaches to old and, thus far, insoluble problems. Lighten up, Dudes!

Maurice Englander was the head of the English department at Lowell High School (1962–1983). A former President of the Library Commission in San Francisco, for seven years he was also a member of the State Commission on Equal Opportunities in Education.

Ebonics Ain't the Answer

by

PATRICIA SMITH

◆

THIS DON'T BE no new thang. Every time they be lookin' at how black kids don't be doin' so good in school, somebody say you can't drag them chillun out of one life and into another and just think everything gon' be alright. So now this time in Oakland they be tryin' to say that what black people talk is another language the same way French and Spanish is and that mean they be bilingual. They calling it ebonics. They say that them black kids can't learn right unless they know the way that they already be ain't wrong, that the way they be sayin' stuff ain't stupid or ignorant but just a way of talkin'.

So most of us black folks who mamas and daddies grew up down souf and come here causa jobs, we grew up where everybody be lookin' and soundin' like us and didn't nobody say nothing 'bout that. We grew up gettin' our hair pressed and testifyin' in church and bringing mama the switch to whup our butts when we be done did something bad. We grew up singin' Miracles songs and signifyin' and tellin' "yo mama" jokes and wasn't nothing wrong with that till we got to school where they heard that loud brown language and said that's wrong, and then they make us say stuff over and over to fix our tongues to they kinda English. And they say "you wrong" so much that we got embarrassed about our ownselves, and who we was, and what was special 'bout us.

So in one way them people in Oakland is right, black kids need to know long time ago that they special and ain't nothing wrong with the way they be saying stuff cause if it so bad how come we be understandin' each other all this time? But them kids don't need nobody to official recognize no ebonics before they can learn other stuff. How you think some of us black folks who was in school long time ago can slip on that proper talk as easy as putting on an old coat?

We learnt it. We learned it. We learned, as DuBois said, that every black American inhabits "a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelations of the other world." We learned that miming mainstream mumbo jumbo was a social and economic necessity. We learned because we have the capacity to learn, so how can we say that our children don't possess that same capacity?

By the way, we speak a dialect — not another language. It is a dialect we love, one that warms us, comforts us and gives us community. And I wish I could say that we couldn't care less how it sounds to the rest of the world. But those "you're wrong, wrong, wrong" lessons stuck, and many black Americans are still ashamed of their soulspeak.

But those of us who are bidialectical learned from people who did not speak the way we did. We listened to teachers, many of whom themselves had dialects, and our brains worked and we grasped concepts and ideas and theories. As black kids, we were introduced to a world we had to enter in order to survive, and then we were offered the tools to get there. What they're saying in Oakland is that those kids are too dumb to learn the way we did, and that's insulting. They're looking at dismal test scores. The answer? Ebonics!

Teachers should look out over a classroom and be energized by the differences, charged by the possibilities. Children, no matter how they be talkin', should be challenged.

Patricia Smith is a columnist for the Boston Globe. *Reprinted with permission from the* Boston Globe.

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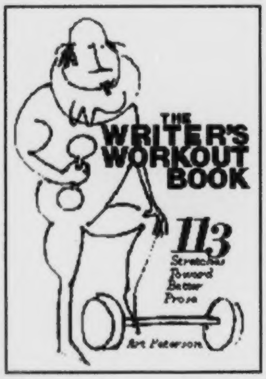

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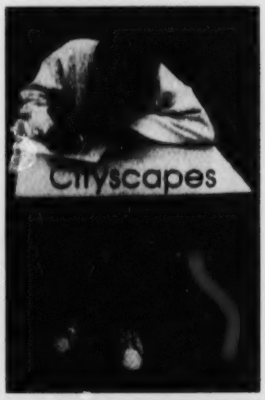

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The Red and Black

by

LAURIE S. BOTTOMS

◆

Laurie S. Bottoms is director of the Blue Grass Writing Project at the University of Kentucky.

Standing at the loading platform, we watch the truck backing in. The driver jumps out, springs up onto the dock to push up the rear door. We lean in for a better look. A solid mass of stacked boxes, like a sliced chunk of the great wall of China, waits to be unloaded.

What we've been looking forward to claiming, we lift, move, and unpack—the 1956 Rogers High School yearbook, *The Red and Black.* Later that day it will be handed out with some ceremony during assembly by the principal, Mr. Peter Donnelly, and the faculty advisor, Miss Amabel North. As a member of that yearbook staff, I help carry the boxes from the loading dock into the auditorium and place them backstage, puffed up by my own importance and by my first taste of publishing. Not long after its publication, my *Red and Black* was packed back into a box where it rested in the garage over the years.

Open it now, many years later, catch the strong scent of mildew, and see rows and rows of photographs of very young people. Notice there is almost no writing in this book. Although composed for adults, it is a picture book. No words at all appear except names under photographs. The other staff members and I must have spent those long hours diligently checking the spellings of names since there is no prose here. No poetry. No fiction. Only photographs and little else. A strange book really.

On the other hand, notice that writing — handwriting — covers many pages, even filling several, even spilling onto the pages of advertising at the end of the book, and notice that these handwritten messages reflect many types and kinds. In fact, Moffett's *Universe of Discourse* may be better exemplified here than in any other school publication. True, there are signatures, standing alone as more names without text, but there are also notes—along with warnings, reminders, apologies, protestations of love and friendship, recapitulations and recastings, fulsome promises, exaggerated praises, and essays crafted of "insider" codes known only to reader and writer.

Here's one typical message: "Stay as sweet as you are."

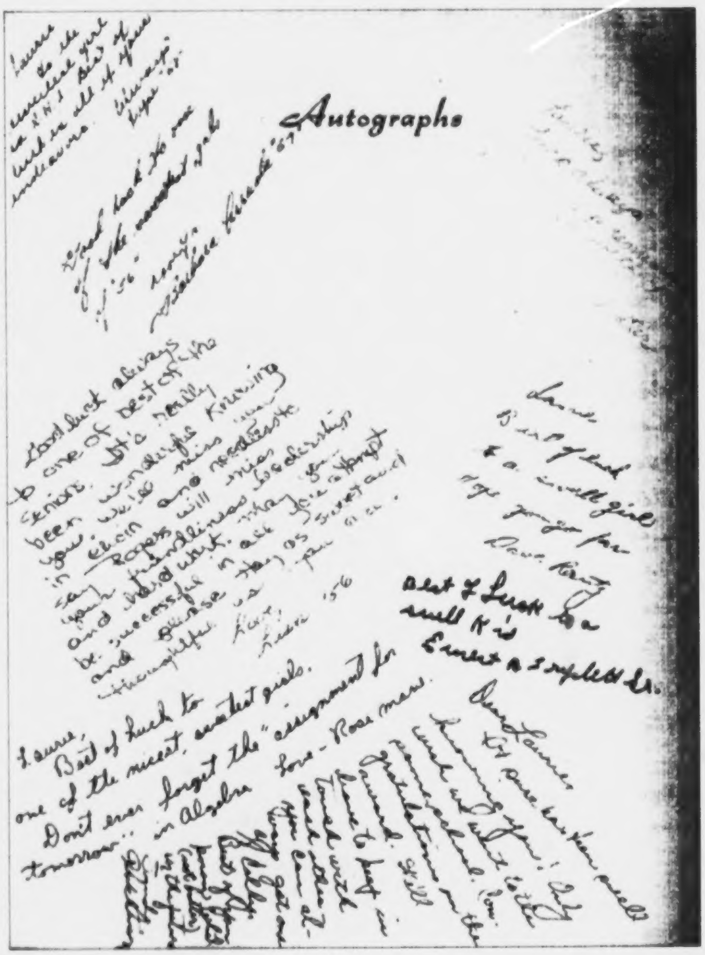
Translation: "I have no idea whether you are sweet or not, but I read this just now in someone else's yearbook, and, frankly, I can't think of anything else to say."

Here's another: "I know we'll always remember Mr. Donnelly, the Creamery, our yellow uniforms, chocolate Awful-Awfuls, slumber parities, and Matzoh balls."

Translation: "Although we both know it was a year of some ease and some terror, of unpredictable manic and depressive switches of mood, we did have some very good days, so now's the time to put the best face on things. I hope we don't lose each other."

And another: "Harris Sperling."

Translation: "I do not even know you, and I have no earthly idea why you asked me to sign this, but I will."



And finally, this: "To a nice young lady. Sincerely, Miss North."

Translation: "These Navy people ... how they come and go. How touching that they think we know who they are and remember them."

A strange book really. A book written after, rather than before its publication. Written by hundreds of people who do not think they are writers at all, by several who would tell you, if you asked, that in truth, they loath writing.

But somehow—mysteriously—on that day if on no other we become, as at no other time, a writing community. Writing in yearbooks we mark the time as our own, the era, the age as ours, saying, "We have our own story. We exist. Even if we don't know one another the way we wanted to, thought we would, needed to, still, we exist." In yearbooks, we create and define ourselves not "the way we were," but "the way we wish we had been." And like many other transparent hopes put into bold words, we see through ourselves and our words easily even as we write them. We know in the midst of writing ourselves into a group of people connected as we wanted to be—that it won't work. For who has ever glimpsed the pages of such a book, full of its reassuring promises of undying friendship, without knowing she lives alone, and, for the most part, among strangers.

Still, this day of the yearbook was one of the rare times in school when I did indeed feel like a writer, did behave as a writer.

So, after the long days of school have come to a close next year, on some rare day in early June I wish for the seniors that they may sit out on the lawn or linger in the auditorium after receiving their yearbooks, writing furiously, writing intently.

Let the shy ones ask tentatively of people they've admired, but never spoken to, "Will you sign my book?" Let the popular ones laugh easily in a circle of classmates— and behave like writers at a best-seller book signings—sending and savoring words. Let those who like to write craft long messages so tender and private that a page must be turned down and stapled. Let them write on and on and on until they must say "continued on page 95."

Let it be a day when the whole school—now become a departure point—gives itself over to opening boxes in which can be found something of the story of the time. Let the bells not call them to class too soon—but allow them to spend all the long, soft afternoon crafting to one another messages of love and recognition.

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Book Excerpt

Meeting the Challenges:

Stories from Today's Classrooms

Edited by MAUREEN BARBIERI and CAROL TATEISHI

Portsmouth, NH
Heinemann, 1996.

◆

Excerpt entitled "Things That Don't Have to Do with English: The Hidden Agenda"

by NICK D'ALLESSANDRO

Maureen Barbieri and Carol Tateishi had not been working long on NCTE's Middle School Task Force of the Standards Project for English Language Arts when they realized there was a need for the book they have now edited, Meeting the Challenges: Stories from Today's Classrooms *(Heinemann, 1997).*

They write, "Our work with the Task Force widened our understanding of the complexities faced by so many who are teaching today. The teachers we met were making language a rich part of their students' lives, yet they did not recognize themselves, their students or their teaching contexts in the journal articles describing current theory and practice."

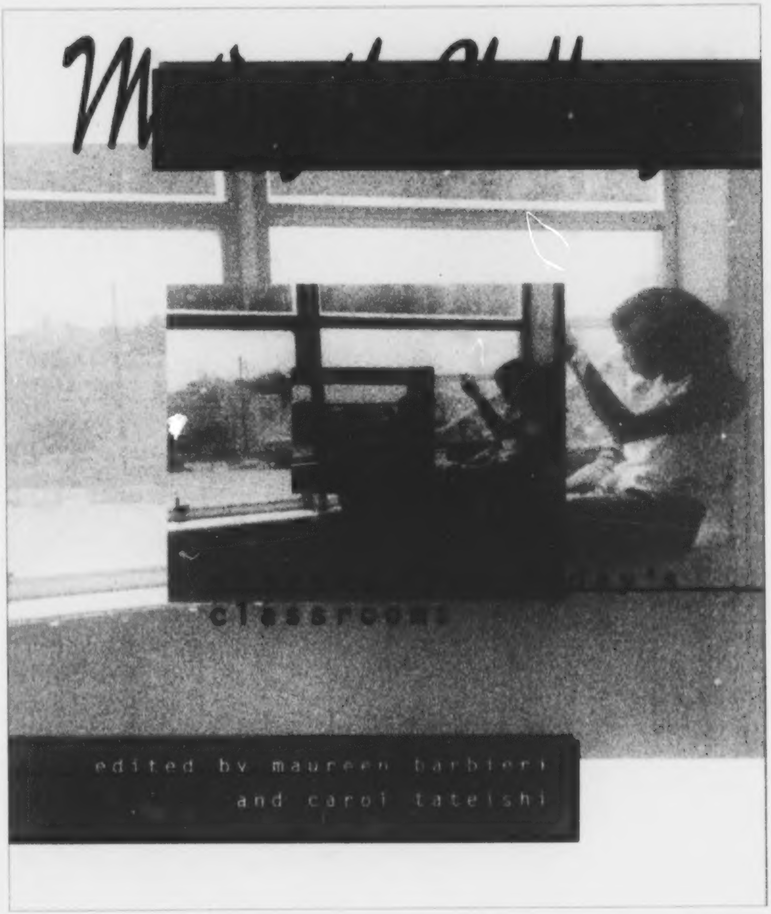
Talking with these teachers and others, Barbieri and Tateishi were confirmed in their belief that today's classrooms are "significantly different from those operating when we were in school." They decided to compile a book that would bring to light the attempts of strong teachers eager to take on the challenges of these changing classrooms. "Writers for our book would be teachers who recognize their students' strengths as well as their needs and who strive every day to find ways to build on these strengths."

Nick D'Alessandro, whose contribution to Meeting the Challenges *"Things That Don't Have to Do with English: The Hidden Agenda" is reproduced here, shows us just how different today's classroom can be compared with the Norman Rockwell version of school some of us think we remember.*

D' Allesando's piece illustrates a belief in community shared by all contributors to Meeting the Challenge. *Barbieri and Tateishi comment, "Without exception, the authors write of the absolute need of a classroom community — a shared sense of purpose; a commitment to the group as each person pulls from the others." Also at the core of D'Allesandro's piece is another assumption shared by most of the authors collected in this volume: school should be a place where students learn skills but also learn how to live. As the editors put it, "As we read these teachers' stories, we come to understand that their work has less to do with teaching language arts than with inviting students to use their learning to understand their lives."*

My students don't always use school the way they're supposed to.

One morning, during what is officially designated as a writing period, I see Hector and Delia writing notes back and forth to each other. I watch for a while and then walk to their tables and read the note over Delia's shoulder. Hector is reluctant to let me see it at first, but Delia reassures him, "Don't worry, he won't tell anybody." They are having a conversation, on paper, about the senior prom in June, a gala dress-up affair which will be held in the garden of a neighborhood settlement house.



They are discussing which lucky girl Hector, the current eighth grade Romeo, will invite as his date. I pull up a chair and ask why they chose to write to each other. Hector responds, "We didn't want to talk out loud. We did this because we didn't want to get in trouble." Since talking out loud and getting in trouble have never bothered these students before, and other students are talking aloud, I express mild skepticism and ask if they think this is an appropriate activity for English class. Hector says, "In a way we were working, and in a way we weren't because it was about things that don't have to do with English." (My long established practice is that personal letters and notes are okay to write in class as long as the student makes a copy in the office and puts it in her folder, so the original text can accomplish its purpose. I'm not surprised that Hector doesn't know this. He rarely writes.)

I press further and Delia admits, "We always do this — it's more personal." Hector adds, "We can have a private conversation without anyone knowing that we're talking about." Both students work (or don't work) in groups of four and unless they whisper or go into a corner of our small room, they really cannot talk privately.

This goes some way toward explaining why Hector and Delia write to each other, but I think we can look for a deeper and more useful explanation. Anne Haas Dyson (1994) argues that we need to reconstruct the child writer in school. Children, she says, live in complex "networks of social and political relationships," and have their own reasons for performing certain writing activities that may have nothing to do with official school purposes. She describes a typology of kinds of "social work" which children do in school and which we can observe in their writing and the uses to which they put it.

Hector and Delia are engaging in "social manipulation or regulation," setting "some kinds of peer affiliations against others." They are establishing that they are close friends, that they exchange confidences about other members of their social group, and that their business is so important that it must be conducted immediately, necessitating the note writing protocol.

Also operating is a classic junior high school social dynamic: in or-

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der for there to be an in-group, there must be and out-group. When I ask if anyone else would read their conversation, they agree, "only Tashana," a trusted friend of both students. This, of course, marks Tashana's social status. She is not much interested in boys yet, but she is a sensible, popular student who serves as the confidant of several of the more socially active students.

Whether we recognize it or not, students construct their own social world in the classroom. I have always been uncomfortable with the idea that school is a place for children where the normal rules and concerns of daily life do not apply, which is often a normative assumption of the culture of school. Of course, as an institution serving a large number of people like, say, a prison or a mental hospital, school must be managed according to rules and conventions. But too many schools are places where a student in early adolescence, who is used to making important decisions in his normal life, can go through a whole day without making a single independent decision about what he reads or writes or learns in the classroom. Refusal to do what is expected begins to seem like a real choice. Once, when I was explaining to the class that some parents had complained about our individualized reading program and wanted the whole class reading "classics" together (whatever that meant, as a parent survey we took later revealed), Carlos, an angry, self-conscious reader, complained, "They say they want us to learn to make our own decisions, and then they won't let us make any."

Many of my students are used to leading lives of a degree of independence some of us would find astonishing. Our school community is Hell's Kitchen, on the West Side of Manhattan, the area between the Hudson River docks and Times Square. The neighborhood, which the real estate agents have begun to call 'Clinton,' is slowly changing from its tumultuous nineteenth-century past when it was populated by stevedores, criminals, prostitutes and transient sailors, but the tenements are still settled by new immigrants as well as descendants of the original families. Although our school, a small one of four seventh and eighth grade classes and an ESL group of children from Latin America, South America, the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, India and China, was planned as a magnet for the whole district, parents in the community began to use it as their local middle school. Our students are almost all defined as "at risk;" we have no entrance requirements and we accept children who cannot function in other district schools.

Our children come to school already knowing that they are marginalized members of society. They go to movies and watch television voraciously and feed on all the false and true images of life in America. They walk to Times Square and see shining high-rise office buildings and tourist hotels going up daily, and come back to a school that is a few rooms on the top floor of a 100-year-old building. They know that other schools provide their students with computer rooms, science labs, libraries and dance studios, while they do without.

Their families, whether birth or alternative, often show a history of stress; poverty, crime and prison, drugs, physical and sexual abuse, neglect, teenage pregnancy, and AIDS are not unusual problems. Some students work for hours after school, and even take time off from school to work, because they have to help their families. Others go right home to shop and cook and clean for younger siblings or ill relatives, or to negotiate a non-English speaking parent through the world. Many of our children carry a load of responsibility that seems too heavy for such young shoulders. Every teacher is on suicide watch.

Veronica didn't come home last night, do we know where she is? Jamel's father beat him again. Raquel is crying and won't tell anyone what's wrong. Calvin's mother didn't feed him, can he have an extra breakfast? Andre is high. Wendy is having an asthma attack, we need to call an ambulance. Do those look like bruises on Shirley's face?

School functions as a safe place for our children, with its structure and regularity, but also a controlled and controlling place, where curriculum and governance are determined without their say. They are reluctant writers. Many of them have failed in the official school discourses of subject area writing and English themes, or they have been provided with inappropriate and outworn models. Getting some of my students just to put pen to paper can take months when the usual reward systems of middle-class life simply do not apply.

My students have their own lives, full and demanding ones, that they do not necessarily check at the schoolhouse door, and when they are presented with an opportunity to bring those lives into the classroom in ways that are meaningful to them, they work it.

I always plan several periods in my English class as The Writing Workshop. I see it so clearly: children writing quietly, drafting and revising their work, others sharing in small conferences, all of us coming together at the end for a group read. Mini-lessons and our reading will serve as appropriate genre models. Occasional pieces can be private, but pieces will be shared, so please keep that in mind as you write.

Can I use curses? Can I write about somebody in the class or teachers? Can I write a letter to my mother in Ecuador? Can I write something and not let anybody read it?...Well, uh, yes.

I lay out this plan to them and then the questions begin: Can I use curses? Can I write about somebody in the class or teachers? Can I write a letter to my mother in Ecuador? Can I write something and not let anybody read it? Do you swear that nobody else can go in our folders?

Well, uh, yes.

For some of my students, this is unparalleled freedom in a classroom and they immediately begin to use it for their own purposes. They ignore the structure I would like to see in place, substitute their own idiosyncratic conventions and work out their own agendas which have no relation to what they're supposed to do in school. The first time a student rushes in on a reading day and says, "Can I write, it's really important?" the schedule goes too. One rule that does remain is that I read almost everything. That's my job as the teacher, I explain, and necessary for assessment and evaluation (we negotiate the criteria later). Students learn to trust, and they usually enjoy conferences with me — they like the notice of their work, and that they have their teacher's undivided attention. They may or may not follow my suggestions for revision, depending on the intention of the piece.

Students began writing to, for and about each other. Personal relations became a major subject. Noel, an eighth-grader who divided his time between his father in Greece and his mother in New York, was in love with the school diva, the beautiful Crystal. He used several writing periods to draft, share, revise and edit a letter to her. He shared the draft with his closest friends, and the process of writing became part of the social dynamic as one friend told another, "Noel is writing a letter to Crystal." What would it say? How would she respond? Who else would get to read it?

> *Dear Crystal,*
> *I know we've had our differences, but that was in the past and now we're in the present, so the past is behind us. What I'm really trying to say is that I miss you and I can't stand being without you, in other words, I'm miserable without you. And the reason I'm like this is that I never thought I'd find someone to love. Now you're the only one I want in my life. I guess that's why you're always on my mind.*

Noel had reacted to rumors of Crystal's interest in another boy but as he learned, in possibly the most important lesson — for him — of that day or week or month:

> *Acting like a kid made me lose you. Losing you was a mistake and everybody learns from mistakes and I learned from mine. When you were with me you made me feel so happy because you were always there for me. But when we separated I felt I was empty like I lost a special part of myself.*

Crystal, from all reports, was pleased with the letter and since Noel was an ace basketball player as well as writer, love letters became an acceptable genre for boys as well as girls.

Priscilla, the seventh grade diva-in-waiting, was the object of quite a different kind of letter after she wrote to Hector to announce their breakup. Hector's letter was a joint effort with Calvin, one of the best writers in the class. Hector replied, when I asked him, that he was writing because Priscilla wanted a response to her letter. "We worked on it together," Hector said. "We thought it was a good time to do it because you said, 'Write what's on your mind.' We discussed it before, because it was how I really felt. We wrote the first draft and a second to make it neat." Priscilla's writing ability came in for criticism in Hector's letter back:

> *Dear Priscilla,*
>
> *You know that the letter "you" wrote, you know you didn't write*

> *it all by yourself. It was all bullshit! BULLSHIT! You think you can make me jealous by writing some shit about some other guys. If it has anything to do with playing, I played you ever since the second time we went out. And by the way, Friday didn't mean anything to me, it was like a nightmare kissing you.*

Hector concluded with,

> *Next time you have something to say to me, don't send any of your friends to write it for you, because I know you can't write like that, you BITCH!!!*
>
> *P.S.: I don't love you.*

This letter was also the talk of the room for several periods. Students were already taking sides, and Hector and Calvin made sure everyone knew what they were doing while they worked on the letter. When the letter was presented to Priscilla in the hallway by a friend, a planned public event, she crumpled it without reading it and threw it in the garbage. "Tell him I'm not interested in anything he has to say," she told her girl friends. Hector had never spent as much time and effort on any writing during the year. But the letter became an important part of his social discourse because he had both the opportunity and the reason to write it, and its significance was obviously not lost on Priscilla.

Students used writing time to discharge anger that was too personal or inappropriate for public expression. When Luz, a moody eighth grader, was laughed at for her misreading of a word, she refused to read aloud anymore, put her head down and began writing furiously in her notebook:

> *I hate this stupid class. Every time I make a mistake, the rest of the class laughs at me. I hate them, it's not my fault that I am a slow reader. People are just so stupid, I am so mad at them mad at the people in my class - just because they read faster than me they think they're better than anyone but the more they think they're better, the less of a person they are because I'm so pissed off." Man it's not fair. All of this just makes me cry. I'm so upset. People are just so rude and "upnokches."*
> *Ass holes*
> *All of them*
> *Ass holes*
>
> *I'm just so pissed off, man I have never in my life met such Assholes, especially*
> *Hector*
> *Tiffany*
> *Calvin*
> *etc...*

I read Luz's piece over her shoulder while she was writing, and I asked her later, when she was calmer, why she dealt with the situation by writing rather than acting out, her usual response to stress. She said, "I wanted to leave, and I wanted to hit Calvin. I wanted to put them in their place. Writing was the fastest way to get the anger out." Of course, it wasn't, but her reasoning reveals a developing sense of herself as part of a community and an evaluation of the possible consequences of her behavior. "I wanted to storm out of the room, but it would make people talk more. If I had a fight or argument, it would make me more upset. Writing is the way I want to express myself without making a show." Luz, in retrospect, seemed pleased with herself for having found a way to deal with her feelings constructively, and she continued to use writing time in class to explore her often troubled relationships with friends and family.

I could not help thinking that David's piece was a way of telling us that something was wrong and he needed help, not a classroom exercise in poetic form.

Students like Luz seemed to enjoy using what they called "curses" or "file language." (File, I think, comes from a combination of 'foul' and 'vile,' both standard parent/teacher expressions for language that many of us find offensive). I could see that it empowered students in some way to use language in their writing that had no place in the official school discourses. Although I have had occasional complaints about this policy, it has always seemed to me arbitrary and hypocritical to deny students use of the same words they hear in movies and on the street constantly, on prime time television in their own homes, and that they use in their own spoken language. This becomes one more part of their real lives that they must leave at the schoolhouse door, but language is not the same as a box cutter, beeper, baseball cap or gum.

We discuss both the effectiveness and the limitations of such language, and the situations where it would and would not be appropriate. Of course, not every student uses it in every piece; it remains an option of expressive language in certain modes of writing and for particular purposes, just as it is for real writers and real people.

Our school has no budget line for a guidance counselor, and family problems frequently worked their way into students' writing. David, a tiny, furious boy whose mother was rumored in the neighborhood to be a *bruja*, wrote:

Goodbye

Why did you leave me
Why couldn't you stay
For at least one more hour or maybe a day
I had a couple of tears in my eye
I didn't even have a chance to say Goodbye
I bursted to cry as soon as you were dead
As soon as I saw you on top of the bed.
I felt your heart it did not beat
I got so mad I stomped my feet
I yelled Mommy Mommy she is dead
Mommy, found on top of the bed.

He said, when he showed it to me and I asked him where he got the idea, "I heard on the news that somebody was murdered and the first three lines just popped into my head. I just continued it because it made sense." David showed it to one friend "because I wanted him to tell me if it was good," but the smirk on his face suggested that he was not unaware of his poem's shock value. I asked David if he would share his poem with anyone else. He said he would show it to the school's director, a frequent family mediator, "because she might be interested," and I could not help thinking that David's piece was a way of telling us that something was wrong and he needed help, not a classroom exercise in poetic form.

Students also negotiated complex problems of sexual identity in their writing by using different points of view. Delia and Joann, best friends, with a shared history of sexual abuse, wrote a series of fictional letters to each other (what their high school teacher will call an epistolary story) as lesbian lovers.

Dear Lisa,
I understand that you don't want me cause you are the kind of girl who wants to be free and have everyone, and I am none of that. All I ever did was care for you and I'm sorry if that was wrong for me to do.
P.S. I still love you even if you don't.
P.S.S. Hope we are friends.
Your friend,
Paco

Lisa's reply:

Yo,
Baby.
I can't say I love u anymore because LaToya's so good she practically sweeps me off my feet. I'm sorry for what I put you through, but you must move on.
Love never again,
Lisa
P.S. LaToya's a much better lover...

The letters cover the span of two years and after the accusations and recriminations, the former lovers reconcile as friends.

This project was a secret. The girls worked by themselves and shared their drafts only with me. I knew I was supposed to be shocked, but since I have always included a selection of gay and lesbian positive adolescent novels in the class library, I was only a little surprised. When I asked, as I always do, why they wrote the piece, they said that they wanted to see what it felt like to be lesbians and this was a way to do it. They would not discuss it further.

All of this writing is fine, colleagues allow, students expressing themselves and all that, but what are they learning? I think that they are learning a lot, but very little of it shows up on standardized tests (except for the State Preliminary Competency Test in Writing, which we treat as a set of writing tasks, each with its own rules and conventions, performed for a particular audience and political purpose). The primary work of adolescence is becoming a person, negotiating an identity between the self and the community. Students know this and are actively engaged in the process every waking moment. School, with its institutional purpose of socialization into a community of shared knowledge and represented experience, and its lack of opportunity for individual decision-making, can become peripheral to what a student perceives as his real life.

Young people need to understand their place in the world. They need to reflect on and imagine their own lives. This is the hidden agenda that they all bring into the classroom. They can be supported in using school structures to accomplish this task of their own making.

continued on p. 32

Worth a Thousand Words

Technology

by

STEPHEN MARCUS

◆

Editors' note: This is the second of two articles by Stephen Marcus describing his work with the National Writing Project/Polaroid Education Program Alliance. In the first article (Fall 1996), he presented some teaching ideas that readers may adapt for their classrooms. In this issue of The Quarterly, *Marcus illustrates how the Alliance's marriage of words and pictures has helped teacher researchers document and understand their work.*

Stephen Marcus is co-director of the South Coast Writing Project at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He coordinates the National Writing Project Technology Network as well as the California Writing Project/California Technology Project Alliance.

Send us a picture worth a thousand words— along with the thousand words.

This was the final "assignment" faced by thirty-five teachers from around the United States who participated in the Teacher-Researcher Instant Photography (TRIP) Project, a special undertaking of the National Writing Project/Polaroid Education Program Alliance.

In a previous issue of *The Quarterly* (Vol. 18, No. 4, Fall 1996), I described this Alliance, an ongoing effort to combine the teaching and learning of writing with the development of visual learning skills, one of the "multiple intelligences." The goal has been to aid students and teachers in adding eyes to their voices. As I noted in my previous article, by the end of the current academic year, 46 NWP affiliates will have provided workshops, cameras, and teaching materials for some 6,000 teachers.

The TRIP project was established as a special-interest group within the larger Alliance. The project helped teachers combine visual literacy and writing as they developed professional portfolios that included 30 pictures that answered the same basic question: who are you as a teacher? Their responses to the assignment ranged from research reports, to HyperCard stacks, to deeply introspective narratives, to rhymed couplets.

The project's approach promoted "making" as opposed to merely "taking" pictures. The former requires conscious and informed choices in the construction of images, while the latter is a passive activity. A related distinction is between pictures *of* people and pictures *about* people (or things). The goal is to reveal an interesting or unusual perspective on its subject matter. The picture is not just *of* something, it's *about* something.

Just as writers prewrite, write and revise, project photographers learned to preview, view and review their subjects. Here are just a few of the suggested portfolio assignments. Note that the assignments could easily be adapted to a student-oriented project aimed at answering the question, "Who am I as a student?"

- Make a set of pictures that tells a story of who you are as a teacher. Make notes that go with the pictures.
- Take a picture of who you are as a teacher that's a first impression. While it's developing, write about what you *think* it will show. After it's developed, examine it and write about what it *does* reveal. Wait one week. Write about it again.
- Take three pictures that answer the question, "Who am I as a teacher?" Put them in order of importance. Explain yourself in writing.

- Pick a student to focus on. Take three pictures that answer the question, "Who is this student relative to me?" Put them in order of importance. Explain yourself in writing.

- Take three pictures that answer the question, "What do I really teach?" Put them in order of importance. Explain yourself in writing.

- Have three of your students take one picture each, pictures that show you as a teacher from the students' perspectives. Before you discuss the pictures with the students, write your own explanations of each picture. Then talk with the students. Then write some more.

- Answer the question, "Who are you as a teacher?" with three pictures that do not have any people in them. Examine each picture and write down five words that help explain what the picture reveals.

These photo-prompts suggested certain avenues for self-reflection. Since the participants had to provide only one photo as a "deliverable" (along with the 1000 words), they did not have to account for or document their various "first draft" photos. Suffice it to say that no one reported having leftover film.

> ***"I have found that the click and flash from the ... camera is followed by a communicative spark. I hope to learn more about that spark."***

There is often, of course, a reciprocal relationship between teachers' studying their teaching and the way they conduct their classrooms. Such was the case, for example, for one of the TRIP participants who was working with aphasic patients. Ellen Bernstein-Ellis helps treat individuals with mild to severely impaired language processing abilities. In so doing, she writes that she looks for "any spark of communicative motivation that feels genuine. Genuine in the sense that there is a real reason to convey or respond to something." She was practiced in the traditional forms of didactic therapy: "In treatment exercises, I ask questions to which the patient knows I already know the answers. It may be good to practice this type of communicative task, but ... it is not a substitute for communication."

Bernstein-Ellis began to let patients and families document holidays and other events and to create photo-stories about those events, with a beginning, middle, and end. When they included photographs in event journals, the photos "ease the discomfort that family and friends experience when trying to carry a large share of the communication burden .... By letting the story unfold through the ... pictures, the conversational format changes from primarily a guessing game to exchanging social comments ... in context. ... There has been a two-way exchange instead of a one-way drill for information."

She also notes that an additional "light bulb flashed in my brain ... in addition to that of the cameras." She realized that her patients "were spending almost half of their day twice a week at the Easter Seals Center, yet they had very little ability to convey to their family or friends what had happened in the course of any session." Using photo journals, including pictures and key words, the patients were able to take home a record of events. A small pilot study suggested that "the journal helped to improve the qualitative and quantitative output of the aphasic individual, and it shifted the format of the spouse's conversation from one of primarily questions to one of comments."

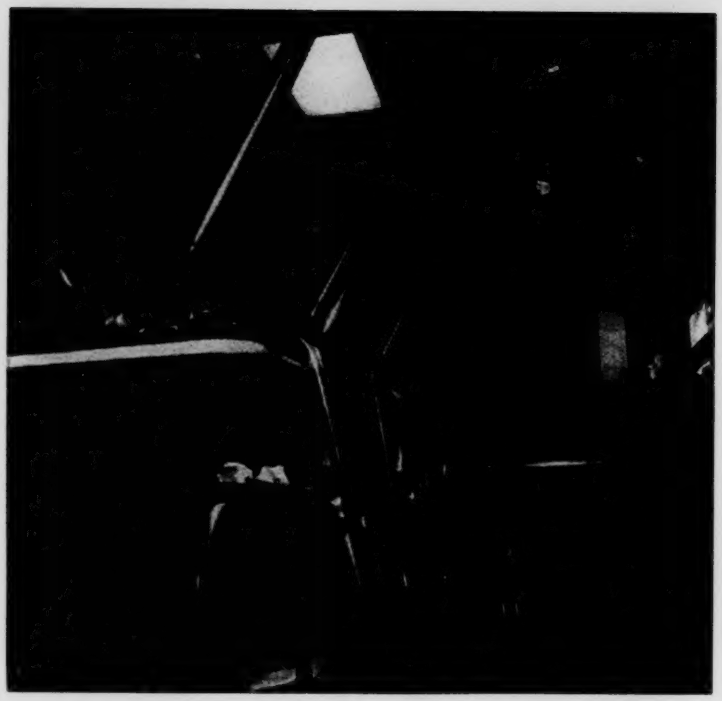
This teacher's involvement with the TRIP project had important payoffs for her patients and for herself as a therapist/teacher. She notes that something "that promotes a genuine communicative spark has great clinical value. I have found that the click and flash from the ... camera is followed by a communicative spark. I hope to learn more about that spark."

In contrast to the relative paucity and difficulty of expression involved with the previous example, Ruth Ann Ritter's 1000-word report, "EWWW, UGgH & OHhhhh" begins with a display of "onomatopoetic pandemonium" that is familiar to many teachers who try to interest their high school students in poetry. Adapting a strategy from the movie "Dead Poet's Society," the teacher allowed students to stand on (and jump off) a desk in the course of reciting and talking about poetry.

Ritter used her camera to document these displays, and significantly, this event became a transforming moment for her. "Taking the picture of Kevin's presentation was a powerful moment for me, too.... It was as if the other thirty-seven students did not exist at that moment. Kevin was the only thing in my frame of reference; I was not distracted by Brynner's incessant hand-tapping; I wasn't busy reprimanding Josh for chewing gum in class, again. All that mattered was in the view of the photographic eye. This reminded me of my need to focus on my students with more *intent.*" Ritter adds that she is too often focused on the other students and "what they are doing or not doing rather than the student who is in front of the class with something valuable to contribute ... I need to find a balance between focusing on one student and all students. Much like the students who stood on my desk, I, too, must constantly look at my classes from different vantage points, through different lenses."

We prepared an anthology of teachers' "1000 Words," along with their selected pictures, and distributed it to TRIP Project participants. Two of the selections appear below. They demonstrate how this assignment encourages both outward gaze and inward reflection. As one teacher put it, "I notice a shift in my thinking about 'Who I am as a teacher' from literal to more metaphorical — [fewer] pictures [of the] classroom, more symbolic ones now."

The two selections below are taken from the "Anthology of 1000 Words," as described above. Alice Slusher asks, "How can I possibly hope to reach [my students] without knowing who they are? She discovers that her own roots help her answer important questions about her students and herself, and she tells a compelling story about a classroom in darkness and light. In a second account, Ginny Woodall-Gainey succeeds in bringing into focus a literal image and a metaphorical one, and in building a bridge between the two. By doing so, she discovers that seeing is believing and that believing is seeing. –SM



Our Stories, Our Selves

Alice Slusher

"Is this a story or a question? Remember, we just don't have time for your stories."

A museum guest-speaker is explaining to my fifth graders her ground rules for keeping the discussion focused. She was on a tight schedule and had so much material (on endangered species, ironically) to share with our class.

Since then, listening to similar pronouncements from others, I find I have many questions. When can our children tell their stories? How else can they show they're finding connections between their own lives and the lessons of the school day? How can I possibly hope to reach them without knowing who they are? How many of their stories can I bear to know this year?

And now,.in seeking some response to the question "Who am I as a teacher?" I sense that my Appalachian roots determine this answer more than I ever realized. Values many generations deep concerning community and place keep shading my perception of myself. My children's stories, my colleagues' stories, my schools' stories keep crowding into my own. I dream these people and this place. I am not the same teacher this year that I was last year. Stress and distress in my school community are making me doubt answers of past years.

This school year has brought many days darker than this photographic image. In turning through my journal and looking for a defining shot, I noticed how many of my images are seeking sunshine: students posing with just-forced narcissus blooms, translucent silhouettes decorating the wet window sills, zigzagging shadows from the convoluted handicapped ramp out the upper level exit, close-ups of children engrossed with the stories they're sharing. Yet I keep returning to this one, shot just after the buses pulled out of the parking lot on a brilliantly sunny November afternoon. The up-ended chairs are a simple gesture to make our custodian's after-school sweeping job a little easier. The reflection off their legs could also be a signal of distress. This was Thanksgiving week, a week of family and blessings.

Jay's desk is the second one in the photo. It has been unoccupied all week. This darkness is preserving the day of his father's funeral. We are engulfed with the pieces of Jay's story. That he loved spending Saturday's working with his daddy. That his father spent a week and a half in neurointensive care. That Jay's family has no medical insurance. That Jay couldn't stand to come to the funeral home the previous night. What we don't know is Jay. How will he be, who will he be, when he comes back to school next week. We make cards and talk about what we could say or give to Jay that might help. "Your heart talking to Jay's heart," I offer. Later, as I read each note, the darkness abates for awhile. Each child has understood, truly understood.

This is not a year for universal understanding. My twenty-one students include eleven who qualify for special programs and others for whom labels have just not stuck. The stair-stepping heights of the desks in this photo hint at the diversity of levels and talents present. In the fragmented schedule that comes with special needs, there is a single half-hour block once a week when all the students are with me. I have students who know shelters and courtrooms, students who know sexual abuse and emotional desperation. I can't begin to imagine all their stories. I am overwhelmed by all the questions. I have learned not to assume that even the most basic concepts or directions are clear. Wanting the usual flares of excitement and joy most ten-year-olds bring to their learning, I struggle against my own feelings of failure. Poems that sparked whole anthologies last year, questions that germinated into whole weeks of study drop dull and timeless. I look into this darkness in somewhat the same way I look into the depths of the hemlock outside my bedroom window, checking to see if there is silent rain falling. I search for the light against the dark. Are there writers growing and quiet voices gaining confidence? Some days I strain and watch, and seeing nothing, I must simply hope.

I search for the light against the dark. Are there writers growing and quiet voices gaining confidence? Some days I strain and watch, and seeing nothing, I must simply hope.

The shortest desk of this group is the one I spend the greatest amount of time visiting. It is home base for Mitch. So much energy and so much rage and so much charm in so tiny a body. Some days, he's all over the room, accusing a friend of stealing his watch, begging a girl across the way to "go with him" and dancing as she agrees, waving his hand and yelling for my immediate attention only to refuse eye contact or assistance when I move to him. Some days, he's so filled with questions about what's going on with his family that he can't even stay in our classroom, racing down the hall, always looking back to see if anyone cares enough to come after him. Some days, he's sure his spelling grade is determined solely by the color of his skin. Some days, he's a little boy who won't let go of a hug.

Looking again at the photograph, there are metallic flashes reflecting and desk tops edged with lights. Still, it is the darkness of floor, ceiling, beyond the chair leg spaces, that dominates. My school is in the process of being remolded. Single light bulbs dangle amidst the exposed pipes and wires that form our hallway canopies. Our students wind their ways through hallways half blocked by ladders and spools of electrical cable. Drills and hammers punctuate our lessons, layers of dust blanket our shelves. We must endure noise and cold and dirt and closed restrooms and flooded closets and chaos at least through the end of this school year.

Our faculty is in a sort of remolding stage, too. Teachers used to spend hours after school working together on projects, talking about the day's high and low moments, offering suggestions and support. Candy bars and cartoons in mailboxes, classes covered during emergencies, compliments and cheers for one another's successes were commonplace. Now, I listen to a twenty-five year professional confess that for the first time in her career, she dreads even walking into our building. Another strong teacher who's worked closely with me for eight years gets damp-eyed as she tells me she never knew how hard it could be to make herself not care, not do more than the minimal requirements. I jam another book into my stuffed bag and hurry out the door. How can a community become so damaged in such a short time? We have new administrators, with new agendas. Changes have been dictated by people who don't know our stories, who don't know who we are, what we do, what we need. We have been blinded by little deceptions and faulty communications. The pain of individual betrayals spreads to our greater community, leaving us all grim and wary.

Tessa is my newest student. She came to us from an urban school with a confidential file an inch thick. Her stories were of severe behavior problems, severe learning problems, severe family problems. Her first words to me were, "I didn't learn a thing last year. I don't know why they passed me." This is not the Tessa sitting in the fourth desk now. This year's story has been of a child who loves music and art, who leaves me little notes and poems. She's found friends here. I smile at her eagerness and tuck her notes away, forgetting those first questions I had.

Beyond the desks, the photograph reveals shelves of books barely noticeable if not for the gilt lettering on the encyclopedia set. Our big fifth grade trip is always to Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's home. Every year's tour leaves us fascinated and awed. Once, the chosen day was drizzly and overcast. Passing through rooms illuminated only by skylights and windows, the children were a little disappointed by the dimness. As we moved into Jefferson's library, the guide pointed out the gold leaf detailing on the books and explained its value in locating particular volumes on just such mornings centuries past. The children flashed glances in my direction to see if I shared their delight. The delight of knowing such lights sustains me.

Who Am I As a Teacher?

Ginny Woodall-Gainey

Bridge (brij) n. 1. A structure spanning and providing passage over a waterway or other obstacle. (American Heritage)

Who am I as a teacher? I am a bridge, providing passage for my students from the knowledge they now possess to what they have yet to learn.

Learner (lurn-er) n. 1. One who gains knowledge or understanding of or skill in by study, instruction, or experience. (Webster's)

Who am I as a teacher? I am a learner, striving for focus, trying to sharpen the image in the camera as I hone in on the answer to the question.

I am a bridge…

I provide passage for Meghan from the first draft of her poem, which is filled with vague lines about children and how sweet and fun they are. I don't give her the specifics, simply a way over the obstacles of her fuzzy thinking. I ask her instead to see the children in her mother's kindergarten class, to show them to us, and she does. Her final draft has them making a messy snack, telling secrets, and finger painting. Her words sing.

I am a learner…

I ponder who I am as a teacher, and I wonder what image in a photograph will show that. Words are much easier for me than visual images. I write, I think, I read, and finally — timidly — I am the camera and view the product. I am surprised at the shadows that obscure my students' faces, and I try again from a different angle where the light is much better. Faces are lit up now but off center. There is too much to remember for this novice!

I am a bridge…

With Virginia Tech professor Kathleen Carico, I am a bridge between communities of learners: my middle school students and undergraduates in Kathleen's Adolescent Literature class. Once a week I see the excitement on my middle schoolers' faces as they call these future-teachers friends. I watch as the semester unfolds, as each becomes touched by the others' responses to The Chocolate War, Julie of the Wolves, Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry. *I watch Andrew, who suffers from clinical depression, come out of himself each week in his letter to his Tech pen pall, Darrell. I watch the Tech students gain insight into the minds, the thinking, and the reading habits of middle school students. I am glad to be a bridge.*

I am a learner …

I learn that observing kids from behind the camera lens gives me ideas about teaching in much the same way that listening to them and reading their writing gives me ideas. In the photo I see Rachel's interest in what Beth is reading to her, and am reminded of Beth's struggles to make her writing clearer. I wonder if showing her this photo, with Rachel so obviously interested in what she is reading, would help her in much the same way that the feedback Rachel gave her minutes later did. Observing my students, their needs come into clearer focus, and I learn where we need to go next.

The image of the bridge comes to me in class as I struggle to reach Noah, a particularly troubled child with equal amounts of hostility and talent. Later I saw myself with Noah, trying to understand, knowing that without that connection there is no hope of making progress, and the image of the Walnut Avenue Bridge came to be. It was the metaphor I'd been searching for.

I am a bridge …

I try to help students see that "… writing is largely a process of choosing among alternatives from the images and thought of the endless flow, and this choosing is a matter of making up one's mind, and this making up one's mind becomes in effect the making up of one's self" (James E. Miller, 1972).

I am reminded of Houston, so excited at first about his story of a WWII fighter pilot, now struggling with how to bring it to a climax and a conclusion — and losing hope. He asks me what he should do. I fight the temptation to be more than a bridge, to give Houston specific suggestions and take away his right to discover for himself. I ask him to read what he's got, then I ask him to imagine how such a character would resolve the conflict, what could he "see" him doing? What event might bring about a day of reckoning? Two days later, he brings me the polished product, much better than anything I could have offered.

I am a learner…

I read the letters, take more photos, re-read the [TRIP Project] directions, take a few photos, think about the rubric for assessing the photos, try to remember "NO'O NO'O" [a TRIP Project suggestion, from the Hawaiian term for a reflective state of mind] and try to choose from the images of the "endless flow." I begin to "see" in a different way, much more aware of light and shadow, wanting to take pictures in places outside my classroom. Around the same time, I begin to realize that the answer to the question "Who am I as a teacher?" may be more easily answered metaphorically than literally.

I begin to see possibilities: I spend an early morning trying to photograph the candle in the room where I sit quietly every morning in the dark, trying to simply breathe, simply be. I think of teaching as lighting the darkness. A nice idea, but the flash makes the effect impossible to achieve. But I have learned. And I know, after all, that the flow is endless.

I am a bridge and a learner...

So, after all, there are two images, one visual, one a concept, both captured in the photograph. The image of the bridge comes to me in class as I struggle to reach Noah, a particularly troubled child with equal amounts of hostility and talent. Later I saw myself with Noah, trying to understand, knowing that without that connection there is no hope of making progress, and the image of the Walnut Avenue Bridge came to be. It was the metaphor I'd been searching for.

But could I photograph it? After several attempts, each one a little better than the one before, but none quite right, I thought of the other answer I'd been carrying in my head these many months, really my first response to the question: "I am a learner." As a teacher, I am always learning: from my colleagues, from students, from projects like this one, from life. The photograph, I realize, shows both the bridge, and the fact that I have learned and am still in the process of learning.

And that's who I am as a teacher!

◆

From a theoretical perspective, there is ample support in the by now familiar work of Eisner, Gardner, Moffett, Smagorinsky, Suhor, and others concerning the value in investigating and implementing our students' and our own capacities for integrating words and images. From a practical standpoint, photography offers an easily accessible and readily understandable medium for translating theory into practice. Teachers taking part in the TRIP Project, and in the NWP/PEP Alliance as a whole, both show *and* tell, to engage, in the fullest sense, in the language *arts*.

The TRIP Project's mission was to support a group of educators who were willing to explore, document, and communicate insights into their professional lives. It was embedded in a context that emphasized the importance of people's *constructing* information and meaning out the raw material of image and language — of transforming data into information, information into knowledge, and knowledge into wisdom. In addition, the Project was based on an increasingly common redefinition of the teacher's craft and role: teachers who observe, question, and analyze their own classrooms find that such classroom-based research benefits both themselves and their students.

The Hidden Agenda

(continued from p. 25)

Students want to do well at it. They want to do their best if they have a real purpose. When they decide that a piece of writing is important to them, for a myriad of private and public reasons, they work until the writing does what they want it or need it to do. In the process, they experiment with form, refer to genre models, consider audience, discuss with peers, draft, revise and selectively share their work. They often require privacy, as we all do, and I allow it. I do not always agree with their intentions or effects, and everything is not permitted, but their choices are respected.

I sometimes wish we could put together a school publication with clever poems and nice stories that the Parents' Association and the District Office would approve. But my students have a different vision of what writing is for. By showing me how school can be a place to realize that vision, they have transformed mine.

Nick D'Alessandro, a teacher consultant for the New York City Writing Project, is a school director for the New York City public schools.

Jim Moffett • 1929-1996

An Appreciation

by

JAMES GRAY

◆

In a 1980s article for The Quarterly James Moffett, who died last December, wrote about what school writing was like for students like him before the influence of James Moffett, educational visionary.

"Mostly my classmates and I were asked to write about what we had read to make sure we had done the reading and to see if we had got the point. Whenever I was asked to write about something outside of books the subject was so remote from me, such as national affairs, that I could know it mostly only second hand and hence could hardly do anything but paraphrase the information and arguments that I got from newspapers, radio and grown-up talk. But that's the point. My teachers really just wanted familiar adult-sounding prose. This they equated with mature writing. They wanted phrasing they recognized, views they had heard aired around them, because this meant their students were joining the adult world. Isn't that the whole point of school?"

James Moffett, the philosopher of education, was to answer "No." school has — or should have — another point. School should connect to the real lives of the students. Through books such as The Active Voice *and* The Universal Discourse *as well as through his presentations to teachers all over the country, Moffett argued that the teaching of writing must be student centered, that meaningful writing can not originate with teacher decrees but must start where the child is, allowing choices and encouraging self-exploration.*

In the two pieces that follow, two colleagues who knew James Moffett in different ways share their memories of the man and reveal the ways his life and work touched their own.

A few years ago when the Soviet Union was still intact, a group of teacher educators from the Soviet Block came to visit UC Berkeley, and I was invited to talk to them about the Writing Project. After I finished my remarks, the female head of Moscow's Polytechnic College of Education — an unsmiling and formidable woman who looked nothing like the Greta Garbo in *Ninochka* —turned to me and asked "WHO IS YOUR THEORETICIAN?" and, without thinking, I blurted out — Jim Moffett ?

The writing project has been influenced by so many teachers and academicians alike, and there were so many names I could have mentioned: Jo Miles, Jimmie Britton, for example. But the more I think of this story the more I like it. Jim Moffett was the right name to have mentioned.

Jim was the model of a teacher of other teachers. He was a classroom teacher with ideas so engaging that he made teachers and others like me impatient to be back in the classroom, and in presenting ideas he gave teachers the larger sense of why particular practices, assignments, activities, readings, are important. He always gave us the why along with the what.

Jim Moffett meant a great deal to the National Writing Project, not only because of the impact of his books: *Active Voice. The Student-Centered Language Arts* texts, *Points of View, Storm in the Mountains* — books that are on recommended reading lists all across the country; it's also his influence on the kinds of pieces teachers write when they come together as a community of writers in the Project's Summer Institutes. Jim's schema of writing assignments that asks writers to rework their ideas in different ways, in different forms, and different points of view has been the model for teachers' writing throughout the NWP network And Jim will be remembered by many directors through his personal and continuing contact with so many sites in all sections of the United States.

I know of no other in education who was able to respond to a question from the audience like Jim Moffett. At such moments he was like one of the great improvisational pianists of the past. No one could excite an audience in the give and take of a question and answer session like Jim could. A good question got his mental juices going, and such moments were wonderful to witness and to be a part of.

One of my long-standing disappointments is that no door to one of our many institutes or think tanks was ever opened to him. It would have been an ideal spot for him, a place where he could have been a permanent Fellow, free to think and write and to discuss ideas with others. There should have been such a place in our rich society for Jim Moffett simply because such a gifted man deserved to be supported.

But in one real way he and his wife, Jan, managed to create for themselves such a place in their own private retreat in the California foothills.

I've known Jim a long, long time, and I respected him greatly. I know of no one more stimulating, more interesting, in our profession, but at the same time I've never felt that I've known more than pieces of him. He was much too complicated to be able to say "Here! This is Jim Moffett!"

He constantly stretched us and surprised us. He was playful and experimental, theoretical and practical, brilliant and wise, honorable, uncompromising, and spiritual as well as political. He was our philosopher as well as our teacher, and frequently he was the conscience of our profession.

He was an original. There was nothing ordinary about him. Even at the end of a long day while the rest of us crawl into bed and stretch out with the covers tight around us, Jim Moffett would move to the wall next to his bed and stand on his head!

Jim Moffett was a teacher who, through the quality and range of his work, has become and will continue to be a national resource for American education.

There's no one in our profession I honor more. I stand in awe of him.

James Gray, founder of the National Writing Project, is currently the chair of its board of directors.

Co-Authoring with Jim Moffett

by

BETTY JANE WAGNER

◆

When Peggy Loofbourrow asked me to send in a personal account of what it was like to coauthor with Jim Moffett, I didn't realize this would be one of the toughest pieces I'd ever write. It actually cost me a speeding ticket, which is not something I should blame on the *Quarterly*, but at the moment I realized the police car was following me and not someone else as I was slowing — but not soon enough — into the 30-mile-an-hour stretch of Chicago's Lake Shore Drive, my first thought was, "Good, now I can stop and write out what I was thinking about working with Jim." Which is just what I did. Instead of feeling frustrated at the wait or the ticket, I actually welcomed having time to write down some notes during the minutes it took the officer to write out the citation.

There is no way really to summarize what it meant to be a coauthor with Jim, a Mississippi-born California cowboy. Jim was simply the most interesting professional I knew — an ingrained visionary, yoga teacher, and guru who with his wife Jan staked out a claim near the majesty of Yosemite and yet deigned to dialogue for a quarter of a century with this Colorado-born, now confirmed city woman, about the future of language arts instruction. We made a good team mainly because we were so different. My advice to all aspiring coauthors is this: choose someone unlike you. Then out of the negotiation and dialogue may come something beyond the vision of either of you. This is what happened with Jim and me. Jim's writing tends to be dense and abstract, mine bubbling and overelaborated. You notice I refuse to say "intelligent vs. empty " Sometimes his metaphors squeaked when you rubbed them, like an over-full balloon, but they usually held and shone brilliantly. Jim eschewed the academy and never played by its rules. He never compromised. (He even convinced Houghton Mifflin not to copyedit our manuscript but to print it exactly as we had written it; this was probably the only manuscript so treated by HM.) I stayed institutionally affiliated and dutifully jumped through all the prescribed academic hoops. He meditated regularly to purify his vision; I talked daily with future and practicing teachers and fellow academicians, refining my own teaching in this rich discourse community. Jim saw the whole — past, present, and future; I was daily challenged by a series of particular moments. His goal was to understand and illumine; mine to teach. Often our conversation focused around whether or not a particular paragraph or chapter would communicate anything useful to future or practicing teachers. I regularly sent him feedback from students who were trying to apply the ideas in our various editions of *Student-Centered Language Arts*. He always wrote back — to them and to me.

Our dialogue continued in letters, in packets of manuscripts with notes in the margin, in phone conversations, at late suppers in Chinese restaurants near NCTE convention headquarters, over Indian curry

Jan fixed in their cozy ranch house near Mariposa, with its ecologically sound compost heap and solar-powered office, over enchiladas at our pine cabin in Colorado, and with Caesar salads after steamy Writing Project Summer Institute days in Illinois. We even talked manuscript revision while drinking the thin offerings the natives euphemistically called 'milk shakes" in Nandi in the Fiji Islands before watching an awe-inspiring fire-walking ceremony over white-hot stones.

Over the years, Jim and I both changed. His vision expanded to cover an ever wider scope. In my role as Chicago Area Writing Project Director, I focused increasingly on the goals, constraints, challenges, and teaching practices of city teachers. I am certain *Student-Centered Language Arts* would never have been as good a book had we both not struggled together to make it reflect both of us. It was a true collaboration, in the best sense of the word, and our experience has made me advocate forever candid feedback and honest negotiation as the furnace in which the strongest ideas can be forged.

By the time we got together face to face for our 1992 revision of *Student-Centered Language Arts*, my own theoretical position had moved far enough from his original assumptions about language growth that we almost came to an impasse until we decided to have his theory published separately in *Detecting Growth in Language* rather than in the book we coauthored together. Through all of our dialogue and negotiation, however, Jim and I continued to respect and appreciate each other's views, and it is hard to imagine wandering into the darkness of the future without his light to guide us. His death is an immense loss to our profession.

When Jan called to tell me he was gone just a few days after a long phone conversation I d had with him, I was shocked. In my letter to Jim after that last call, I had said, "You sound like your old energetic self! and I'm so glad." He was looking forward to coming to Chicago for the Research Assembly in February.

Jim's greatest contribution to our profession has been his intuitive perception of the wider context in which any discussion must be couched. He illuminated the concept of writing as a revision of inner speech and he recognized reading comprehension in the context of a broader connection with the world. He saw the rise of the Christian right as a manifestation of the nation's spiritual hunger and he placed the world of school in the broader vision of a society where school as a separate locale for learning does not exist. Working with Jim was like following a dance partner whose right foot firmly kept the beat of the rhythm of teachers everywhere while his left was kicking wildly into outer space!

Working with Jim was like following a dance partner whose right foot firmly kept the beat of the rhythm of teachers everywhere while his left was kicking wildly into outer space!

Betty Jane Wagner is professor in the reading and language department at National-Louis University in Evanston, Illinois, and the director of the Chicago Area Writing Project.

40

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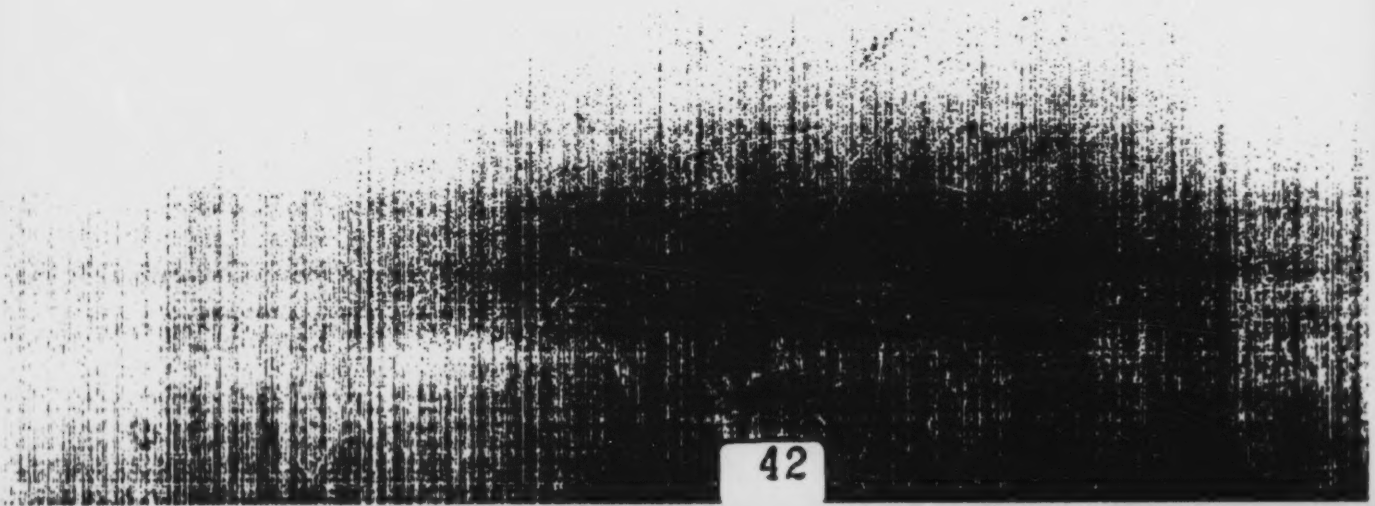


The Quarterly
OF THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT

Spring 1997

Volume 19, Number 2

Kid Lit Writers Write about Kids Writing

(See Page 26)

CONTENTS

PRIVATE LIVES: HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND?

Sounding Board: The Writing Teacher as Confidant 1
COLEEN ARMSTRONG

Are You All Right Dear?
The Writing Teacher as Mother Hen 5
BONNIE FAIMAN

BOOK REVIEW

Just Girls:
Hidden Literacies and Life in Junior High 7
REVIEWED BY DEBRA SCHNEIDER

WRITING CLUBS

The "Righting" Club:
Travails and Triumphs of a Community Writing Workshop 11
MICHAEL LARKIN

Against All Odds:
Implementing a Middle School Writing Club 22
NANCY RENKO AND MARY WEAVER

THE LIBRARY CORNER

Children as Writers in Literature
with Annotated Bibliography 26
CHRISTINA FACCIOLI

Cover illustration by
Irene Haas from *Dear
Dragon* (1962).
See page 26.

The Quarterly
OF THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT

Spring 1997 Volume 19, Number 2

Sounding Board:

The Writing Teacher as Confidant

by

COLEEN ARMSTRONG

◆

> *Well, Dad went out and got drunk again. He was trying to hit my mom like always, and Danielle got between them, and he smacked her right on the top of her head. It wasn't really anything. Danielle even laughed about it. But then my dad started crying about how the left side of his body was going numb, and then Mom and Danielle and I all started crying. I was begging him to stop, because he'll be lucky to live long enough to see me graduate, let alone Danielle. He just did his usual thing, called me a whore and a bitch. Funny how when he's away things are always so peaceful. Then he comes back, and the whole family starts fighting again.*
> *— Chrissie*

The above journal entry wasn't exactly typical, but it wasn't unusual either. In twenty-nine years I'd seen many like it. When I first began my teaching career nearly three decades ago, I decided in bright-eyed, eager enthusiasm that in *my* English classes the kids would write — so much so that putting their thoughts and experiences on paper would soon become natural, spontaneous, just like breathing.

To both my delight and chagrin, that's exactly what happened.

Delight, because I often read passages as poetic and heart-wrenching as anything published professionally. Chagrin, because in those early days I was often so clueless concerning how to respond. What could I say, for example, to a fifteen-year-old girl who had just learned that the woman she'd always thought was her older sister was actually her mother — and her father was ... her father?

Papers like Chrissie's were by now common enough (and I'd gained enough insight and maturity) that I was better equipped to handle ... well, not just corrections on sentence structure and hop-scotch logic, but something far more important: the substance of what a student was telling me.

If you're like most teachers who consistently try to do the right thing, you realize there are other issues involved here. You're probably struggling between the urge to give Chrissie a hug and the obligation to follow a current legal requirement: to report any form of suspected child abuse. Any form.

But what if I told you that in this case the "child" was two months shy of turning 18 — and three months shy of graduating from high school? What if I told you that she already had plans to move out of her parents' home once her diploma was safely in hand?

What if I told you that she begged me to keep quiet, that she had the situation under the best of her control, since her dad was hardly ever home anyway? What then?

> *I had the time of my life over spring break. I went wild and did whatever I wanted. But I also did something so embarrassing and so cruel, and I am so ashamed. I cheated on my boyfriend. The only excuse I have is that I was on pills, I was drinking, I was high. I know that's not an excuse, but I wouldn't have done it if I hadn't been messed up. I just want to start crying right now. I am so stupid. How could I have hurt someone I love so much? He knows everything, and he still loves me. I messed up so bad, but I can't fix it. I just added to all of Tim's problems. God, what's gonna happen now? If you have any advice, please tell me.*
>
> *—Brandi*

> *I'm about four or five. I watch my mom's boyfriend beat her. I see her lying in the hospital helpless and on her own, with a cast on her arm, broken from the attack. He used his boots on her. I feel worthless for not being able to protect the one person I love. At least she pays him back by putting a gun to his head and kicking him out of our lives.*
>
> *—Tony*

So much for legislation. What if the "abuse" more closely resembles self-inflicted guilt and remorse? Or what if it occurred twelve years earlier? What should a teacher do then? (Did anyone ever think writing instruction would be simple, just a matter of opening a manual and demonstrating patterns of organization?)

So what, exactly, is the teacher's most essential role? Confidant—or whistle-blower?

I offer these dilemmas not to make you squirm, but to point out that the question of how personally involved, evaluative and judgmental a teacher should become with student writing will never be adequately addressed by any legal means. It will always be more a matter of the heart.

In Tony's case I told him that he had a real talent for drawing vivid word-pictures, and stories like his were haunting and memorable. I also told him to keep on writing, quit worrying about lousy spelling; we could always fix that! I also said that I wanted to see more of his stuff. (This was the first paper he'd turned in all year.)

In Brandi's case I offered warmth and sympathy, then gently encouraged her to figure out why she had placed herself in such a dangerous situation to begin with. Whom was she really testing, Tim or herself? Whom was she really trying to hurt?

In Chrissie's case I checked with a trusted guidance counselor and then informed her of several options: going to the police, filing charges, encouraging her mom and sister to move with her to a shelter....

And then I left the final choice up to her. She elected to remain where she was for the time being. A no-brainer, she said. Which didn't surprise me one bit.

Did I err by not pushing harder? I don't think so. By the time you read this, Chrissie will most certainly be living on her own. She has held down two part-time jobs throughout her entire senior year, socked away as much cash as she can, proudly informed me week after week of her mounting total. She is handling it. Her way.

So what, exactly, is the teacher's most essential role? Confidant — or whistle-blower? Before I answer that, it might be useful to recall some of the topics I was assigned to write about back in high school in the early 1960s. "My Favorite Animal." "Sibling Rivalry." "What I've Learned From My Grandparents." Yep. Pretty racy stuff.

What am I reading today? Take a look.

> *I really don't understand what my problem is with men. I can't keep a relationship for nothing. I try and try, but no one seems to want me. This year I've tried older men, guys my age and younger. I think maybe I push people away because I am afraid to get close to someone. But when I push them away, then I wonder why they aren't there anymore. I am so weird and confused. I just feel like I am going crazy.*
> *— Stephanie*

> *People are tweaking on me about gay shit. It makes my insides hurt. I hate it when people I know have almost the same clothes on as me. That messes up my head. Why does God let that happen? Does he do it for a joke? That shit's not funny. I don't even feel real at this moment. I feel like I'm in a dream.*
> *— Kip*

> *I ran out of pages, so I have to write on the backs. I didn't realize my paper was running out. Why am I such an idiot? I just feel like a great big dork. Someone needs to stop me. I feel like going off. I should cut my hair. I should get a buzz. My head would be all fuzzy. People would pet my head like a dog. I think I might do it.*
> *— Scotty*

> *Did you see that TV show about people being addicted to sex? Well, I think maybe I am. Please don't think any less of me. But if I go for even a couple of weeks without it, I just feel like pulling out my hair or ripping off someone's face. I don't understand. I don't know any other girl who has these same feelings. Even if I just meet a guy, it's like they can sense that if they start with me, I won't say no. What can I do to get myself under control? I've been staying home and doing nothing for a long time, but my social life is going downhill. What is my problem? It's like sex has ruined my life. I just lost my virginity last June, and I've already been with five people. Am I this way because I have no self-confidence and think I'm nobody? Can you help me?*
> *— Maria*

Some authorities feel the only "right" response to papers like these is to ban certain topics from student writing, most particularly objectionable language. Some teachers have been lambasted, even terminated for allowing total journalistic freedom. But what does censorship accomplish? Where do questions like Maria's go? And let's get real: isn't an off-limits policy better designed to protect teachers than students?

What I've learned from reading my kids' writing for nearly 30 years is this: non-academic teenagers are only interested in becoming better writers if we respond first to who they are and what they're saying. Chrissie is a tough-as-nails street kid. (On the outside, of course. She also has a dimpled baby's face, with lustrous blonde hair and soft, green eyes.) But now that we've established a relationship, she actually listens when I correct her "he don'ts."

Let's get real: isn't an off-limits policy better designed to protect teachers than students?

Tony is sullen and uncommunicative. But when I ask if I can borrow his essay, he pulls it instantly out of his backpack. He's been carrying it around ever since I returned it four weeks earlier. (There's a clue here.)

I've also found that kids who would never dream of coming in at lunchtime to talk over a problem will reveal themselves with incredible candor on paper. Nearly all of my teacher-student friendships, many of which have endured decades beyond that single year in the classroom began through our scribbling back and forth. (How else, I ask you, is a withdrawn 16-year-old boy going to *talk* to a 50-year-old woman?)

Teenagers need grown-ups in their lives. They need our insights and our reassurance far more than they will readily admit. (Every good teacher knows this.) But they must feel free to reveal themselves to a sympathetic, non-judgmental adult in an atmosphere where they can be fully themselves. If I truly want a class where kids are allowed to find their own writing voices, then I must adamantly refuse the role of traffic cop. I have no right to "out" them without permission, report indiscretions or violate confidences. They must know beyond any doubt that whatever they tell me will stay private unless they decide otherwise.

Which, occasionally, they do. Julie was brash and outspoken, someone no one messed with. I was genuinely surprised to learn, then, that when she was twelve her father began creeping into her bedroom each night to "check" how her body was developing.

Once she'd begun to write about her molestation, she did something that surprised me even more: she started to talk publicly about it. Not only in my class, but in others as well. For a time I was frightened for her, afraid that her peers would start saying cruel things behind her back, start charging she must have somehow encouraged it. Julie tossed her head. She didn't care. She'd found an angry voice, and she intended to keep on using it.

What I feared most never happened. Julie received nothing but support from her class. Maybe it helped that they were seniors and had developed their own respect for life's solitary journey, as I so often called it. Or maybe they'd learned something from their teacher about being non-judgmental. I'd like to think so.

But what, you might ask, about cases where kids write about actions that are morally reprehensible or even illegal? What then? Well, like most teachers I've seen my share of stories about cruelty to animals, vandalism, drug abuse, even a case where a kid had been arrested for dropping bricks from a freeway overpass. No big deal, he said. It was fun.

I took a day or so to calm down, gather my wits and remind myself of my own rules for giving advice: keep it short. Don't get preachy. Have faith in the kid's inherent good sense, and most definitely downplay the shock value. Horrified gasps may be exactly what he wants. But still, find a way to get his attention.

"Someday," I whispered to Jeff, slinging one arm over his shoulder in the hallway and precisely punching each word, "you'll have a two-year-old strapped in a car seat. *Your wife* may be driving that road." Then I walked away.

Okay, maybe it didn't change his life — or even make him stop and think. But maybe it did. And I can certainly guarantee that Jeff will remember my words when he first gazes into the face of his own newborn.

Most of the time, though, a situation which calls for intervention is serious, but not life-threatening. Most of the time I see papers which just cry out for personal responses.

I am in dire need of someone's help. I have looked inside myself to find the answers to all of this pain, but I'm getting nowhere. As of April 27 I'm supposed to take on a brand-new last name and become the wife of a man I love dearly. But (yes, but) I'm starting to feel like I'm just not ready to be married. I'm literally scared to death of the word forever, because I'm only 18. I've been hanging out with Ken since Dwayne left for California, and now I don't know what I want. He's begging me to give him a chance. Maybe I should be committed to Hughes Ward. If I break it off with Dwayne I have a white dress, two gold wedding bands, flowers ordered and my friends in expensive bridesmaids' dresses. Everything is ready, and I'm trying to decide what to do??? PLEASE HELP. Could I have some advice?
—Angie

I am so sorry for not turning in my essay questions. There are so many things on my mind. I can't seem to concentrate on anything. I know if I don't get straight I won't graduate. Maybe I'm afraid to. Maybe that's why I'm not trying. If I don't graduate I won't have to leave all of my friends, will I? I can just make time stop. Does this make any sense to you?
—Joe

Yes, it certainly did — primarily because it was something I'd heard before, not once, but dozens of times, and I understood too well how it felt to be young and bewildered by one's own feelings.

That's why I'm really here. Not only to correct grammar and spelling or to scrawl "fragment" or "more details please" in margins. But to reassure, offer support, give kids like Angie and Joe a ready ear and a safe sounding board. Help them to tread water until they feel better able to swim on their own.

Coleen Armstrong has taught secondary English in the Hamilton, Ohio schools for twenty-eight years. In addition to teaching, Coleen is a prolific writer with nearly three-hundred free-lance articles in print, and she hosts her own cable-television talk show called "Hamilton Impressions."

Are You All Right Dear?

The Writing Teacher as Mother Hen

by

BONNIE FAIMAN

◆

"Do you remember the first time you were introduced to someone who became very important in your life?" I asked my students. "Today, we are going to write about that person!

"Maybe an old-fashioned great-aunt came to visit. She pinched your cheeks and cuddled you to her and forced you to eat an ethnic food. Maybe you liked it and her and will miss both.

"Maybe you went to Maine on vacation and a long-lost relative your age showed up, and showed you up, and was better at water skiing than you ever thought possible. Maybe you'll never see him again, with a little luck."

I enjoyed the results of this assignment: reams of paper producing anecdotes galore. I especially was pleased by Jeff's paper which was written about his nephew who came into the world in Atlanta, "...A three day ride from our apartment in Boston. I was eleven and he was newborn. I thought he was going to look like a baby, but when I first saw him, he was all bundled up tight like a rèd hot dog. He was lying on a vibrating chair and was crying. I did learn to love him, though he cried a lot that week."

Lionel's paper crossed my desk next and changed my mood. He has lived all over the world and has adjusted well to many different schools and environments, probably because of a genuinely sunny personality.

He had once written a composition entitled, "My Career Choice." In it he said, "I'm going to be a military man just like my dad. I like the uniform, meeting new people, and seeing new places. I like the privileges we get, and the life we live. I love Admiral Peary Drive where my house is now, and I like my friends, but I won't mind it if we go somewhere else and do something different."

On this latest paper he had written another clear message:

> *A Brother I Just Met*
>
> *One time my mom and dad came into my room and they said, "How would you like to meet your half-brother?" I didn't know I had one, so I said, "What's this all about?" and they told me that my mother had a fiancee before she met my dad and they had a baby together. They gave him up for adoption when they broke up. That baby found my mom. After a month or two, we went to meet him. My mom went first. That's how I met Edgar K. He's 19. He's OK.*

My heart went out to Lionel and the following day I asked to speak to him after school. He smiled his usual braces-filled grin and said that he didn't understand participles and would stay if he could get some help on them. Agreeing, we parted with that plan in mind.

During lunch break I practically ran to the copy machine to make a photostat of Lionel's composition for the school social worker. I showed it to her. Now the two of us worried about this young boy and his traumatic encounter. She suggested that I advise him to speak to Ms. Brenner, his guidance counselor, a warm and compassionate person the whole class liked and respected. She'd give good advice and clearer thinking to this issue.

> ***"One time my mom and dad came into my room and they said, 'How would you like to meet your half-brother?' I didn't know I had one, so I said, 'What's this all about?'"***

The afternoon that Lionel was to stay, he came to class on time, good humored as usual, and immediately began doodling on his homework paper. I looked to see if the scribbles were indicative of deep-seated scars resulting from a shock. They were indeed! They depicted Bart Simpson and his sister. The caption read, "Bart *bent* on destructive *mischief*." Two of that week's spelling words were carefully underlined. Bart's sibling's head had concentric circles around it, and her eyes danced askew as she fell captive to her brother's manipulative antics.

I placed my hand on his shoulder and softly reminded him of our appointment after seventh period. He nodded his head and adjusted his eye glasses. I raised an eyebrow and verbally suggested that, while his drawings were creative, he should do the actual assignment, which was to put the spelling words in *sentences*. I tapped the paper with my newly painted fingernail. He smiled sheepishly. He promised to comply next time.

I wasn't sure what I was going to say when he arrived that afternoon but the day raced by and I didn't have time to rehearse. So, when he showed up, I had to think fast.

"Lionel, you wrote a very moving and sad paper about 'A Brother I Just Met.' Are you all right, dear? Are you thinking any funny thoughts about what happened to you or your family?" My words were spoken in a choppy manner, too fast, and forced. I hoped he hadn't noticed.

"Sad? I didn't think it was sad. My mother's still in therapy over this, and that bothers me, but she's getting better and better all the time, and my father and I are doing OK."

"Would you like to talk to Ms. Brenner, the guidance lady?" I asked, using parallel conversation instead of responding directly to what he was saying.

He smiled so enthusiasticly that I was sure I had indeed said and done exactly the right thing.

"Sure if you think it would help her," he said, catching me totally off guard. "I'd be glad to. It can all work out. We're picking up Edgar at the train station later today and we're going out to a restaurant, so I'd rather not stay too late. But any other time would be fine."

If he was waiting for a reply from me, he didn't get one, for I was speechless, something that doesn't happen to me too often. He filled the lull by rustling through a messy notebook of drawings and passed-back quizzes. He pulled out some dog-eared papers and said, "I brought my participle worksheets. Should we go over them now?"

Time went by, three-fifths of the school year, then half, and then spring break. Hundreds of compositions were composed. Most students wrote interesting little plots, because seventh graders have lots to say and are open people who like to talk about their experiences. Many papers are sincere, but few are as moving to me as Lionel's.

I continued to worry. I had lunch with the guidance counselor. She worried too. She suggested keeping an eye on Lionel to see how his adjustment to his new problem affected him. But as he never mentioned Edgar K. again, neither did I. But I kept watching.

As the year went by, his notebook became messier but his personality remained the same. He still had a

continued on page 10

Books

Just Girls: Hidden Literacies and Life in Junior High

by Margaret J. Finders

New York: Teachers College Press
Urbana, Ill: NCTE, 1996.

◆

Reviewed by

Debra Schneider

Debra Schneider is a middle school teacher in Tracy, California and a doctoral student in the English, Language, Literacy and Culture division of UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Education.

A pattern in our students' paired book talks puzzled my partner teacher and me. Although students could read any book they chose, and talk about that book to anyone else who had read it, the girls tended to talk always in the same pairs. We questioned two female focus students about this pattern during a formal interview. One girl explained that when she was done reading a book, she would hand it to her friend and say, "Read this, you'll like it. Then we can have a book talk."

Teacher: [What if] somebody who is **not** your friend comes up to you and says, "I've read *Stuart Little*, too, so let's have a book talk."

Both: (laughter)

One: I guess I would do it because it's part of my grade...but still I would rather do it with my friends.

Two: Of course.

One: I wouldn't feel as open talking about my opinion or anything. I mean, I would still talk about it, but just not as openly as I would with [my friends].

Two: Because we know if we get in an argument, it's gonna be a civilized one...like a logical, opinionated little argument. [With others] it can get kind of out of hand—if you argue. I think I would feel more limited if I did it with another person.

My colleague and I had set up these book talks as a way to get students to work collaboratively to increase their comprehension of literature, but our program had been co-opted. These girls were using reading and book talks to reinforce ties of friendship and to mark and practice social and gender roles. They worked only with their friends, demarcated their social group, and avoided "unfeminine" arguments.

In *Just Girls*, Margaret Finders examines the literacy practices of a group of seventh-grade girls and finds that they, too, use literacy for their own purposes, and not necessarily the intended purposes of the school. She brings together sociocultural literacy theory and the myriad literacy experiences of five girls in a Midwestern middle school to help us focus on school literacy practices and our teaching pedagogy. For a year, she followed these girls through their days, in and out of school. What she discovered led her to challenge what she calls the "myths of student-centered pedagogy" (p. 118). A "writing workshop" classroom is not necessarily a comfortable, safe place for students to feel included; Atwell's (1987) ideas of time, ownership and response cannot conquer well-established patterns of power—which come from popularity, personal appearance, and privilege that extend beyond the classroom. Instead, "the discourse of student-centered pedagogy creates filters that hide the contamination of the room by [these] other contexts and other social roles" (p. 118). Until we look at and recognize the complex social webs in which our students live, we cannot hope to have a truly student-centered pedagogy.

Finders claims that "free choice," an essential element of the writing workshop pedagogy, is "the greatest myth of all" (p. 120). She argues that an "awareness of political and social consequences limited choices for the [girls]" (p. 120). This is an important point, because this awareness is one that many teachers do not share with their students. There is no free choice to write on feminist topics if other students harass you for your choice. If the outside world privileges narrative writing, where is the free choice to write poetry?

We need, she maintains, to revise our thinking about adolescents and to see their complex worlds. Our own findings, then, will lead us to work toward a "student-*negotiated* pedagogy" (p. 126) in which we acknowledge and work within the dynamics that exist in the middle school classroom, making visible the political tensions that accompany literate choices. The pay off, particularly for girls, will be the ability to confront and change the scripts that society has written for them before they begin writing them for themselves.

just girls
hidden literacies and life in junior high
margaret j. finders

A former middle school teacher and now a professor of English and Education at Purdue University, Finders studied the five seventh graders for a year. She identified two group leaders and their circles of friends, two groups she came to call by the names their mothers used for them: the "social queens" and the "tough cookies." She developed trusting relationships with the girls and their families and was granted access to the girls' uses of literacy, both in and out of school, both official and hidden. "I wanted to explore the secretive literate practices that lurked about...I thought that by selecting a language arts program where reading and writing were abundant and central, I would write of community and collaboration and inclusion...I thought I would have a different story to tell" (p. 1). *Just Girls* tells the story she found.

Finders found that girls were using the literacy practices of their reading and writing workshops to "mark special status and allegiance, and...to monitor and sustain social roles" (p. 54), just as my girls were doing with their book talks. She shows us how diverse our adolescent students' needs are by describing her findings as she focuses on the literacies of the two groups of girls, the middle class "social queens" and the working class "tough cookies." These two groups used reading and writing in different ways and for different reasons; seeing their differences challenges us to look more closely at adolescents' literacy practices, and to wonder whether current pedagogy truly addresses the needs of these students.

Until her study, Finders found her view of students "filtered" by what she calls the "discourse of adolescence" (p.28). She contends that this discourse leads most teachers to believe in "the universal adolescent" (p.121), who needs greater independence, more connection with peers and less with family and adults. The "social queens" and "tough cookies" betrayed the myth of this belief. While the "social queens" spent as much time as they could together, and without adults, the "tough cookies" were very family-oriented, and independent, getting together only at school recess and lunch. Tough cookie behaviors were reinforced by family beliefs and economics, but suggest a more complicated view of teenagers than many teachers acknowledge. It is in the failure to acknowledge these basic differences that we begin to complicate peer response groups in reading and writing.

Finders shows that issues of race, class and gender make adolescents a much more diverse group than we recognize. She illustrates this with the school's annual yearbook signing event, the largest school-sanctioned literacy event of the year. While the teachers spoke of the yearbook all year as a way to create a feeling of belonging for everyone in the school and even gave up class time in the last week of school for mass student yearbook signing, fully twenty-five percent of the student body did not buy a yearbook. Neither of the "tough cookies" focus students bought a yearbook because it was too expensive. Of course, even without a yearbook, a student can sign the yearbooks of others. But Finders shows that signing (and even viewing signatures) was sometimes enacted by the "social queens" as a way to include some and exclude others from a social group, and the "tough cookies" did not sign yearbooks.

The social queens wrote bathroom graffiti as a documentation of their relationships and to try out new language and behaviors considered appropriate to the young women they were becoming, not the girls they had been.

It is Finders' access to the girls' hidden literacy practices that gives us the clearest view into their diverse lives. The girls wrote and passed notes, allowing Finders to read the notes. They shared their reading of teen magazines ("'zines"), and their writing of bathroom graffiti and private poetry. Finders found that the "social queens" used notes to act out resistance to authority, cement friendships and establish their social group early in the year. Later, notes passed weren't always even read; the power was established in the passing, as a way of showing one's status by defying the teacher's authority. Ignoring the demands of school, by resisting assigned work, also built this status. The queens wrote bathroom graffiti as a documentation of their relationships and to try out new language and behaviors considered appropriate to the young women they were becoming, not the girls they had been. They also tried on these new selves through close readings of articles, fashion spreads and advertisements in 'zines. "They ('zines) tell you about woman stuff," one queen insisted. Carrying these 'zines to school, and reading them in class from behind a textbook, established a queen's role as social and popular.

The "tough cookies" exhibited different literacy practices. They were fiercely independent, even preferring to be interviewed separately. Finders notes, "It seems that the cookies were friends at least partly because they could not choose to join other groups" (p. 85), and the girls almost never saw each other outside school. Both lived in trailer parks, in homes that defied the stereotype of "trailer park girls," for they were filled with books or magazines and home interior decorating catalogues. They saw literacy practices as either public and competitive, as in school, or private and personal, like the poetry they wrote alone. For them, literacy was a solitary task, not social. Their public personae were suggested by the library books they carried to school (not 'zines), and they were not part of the school's extracurricular activities and social events. They complied with school demands as a way to gain access to a better financial future.

Finders work caused her to question thirteen years of teaching language arts, just as her work led me to question my own writing and reading workshop practices and expectations. Nevertheless, she is not calling on us to abandon this pedagogy. It is important for us to address these asymmetrical power relations among our students consciously and explicitly. Writing can provide the means for our students "to investigate the cultural conflicts that serve to define and limit their lived experience" (Miller in Finders, p. 127). With the awareness gained from reading Finders' book, we can begin to work to create a truly student-centered pedagogy that acknowledges the social and political realities of our students' lives, helps them identify their needs and gives them tools with which to address those needs in creating alternative futures for themselves.

Are You All Right Dear?

continued from p. 6

million friends and kept a steady stream of characters alive and well inside the pages of his notebook.

In one cartoon, a teacher was standing in front of her class, also featured in the cartoon. All the students, save one, were in a frenzy, standing on their heads, poking each other, tossing pencils, out of control. The teacher, however, had her eyes glued to the one student who sat picture perfect, hands folded. He was a self-portrait in Lionel's seat. Watching him had become my Olympic Spectator Sport, and Lionel knew it. Only I was not aware of exactly what I had done.

In my career, I have taught over 2,000 pre-adolescents. I have recognized problems as they come and go. I have dispensed advice as well as information. I have done my best to be calm in the eye of a brewing storm and grandmotherly-like in the face of a tragedy.

But in this case, I had made a mountain out of a pimple. I had obsessed about a well-adjusted child whose parents had obviously dispensed sensitive facts in a clear, understanding and loving way. They had mastered a potential problem and, as only parents can, had nurtured this child through a difficult experience.

Sometime during the spring, I was sad (and pleased) to hear that Lionel would be moving. His father, the Navy officer, received a promotion, a commission, and a new assignment, far away from here (and probably far away from Edgar K).

I will miss Lionel's sweet smile and some of his drawings, but I will not worry about him. I hope that I taught him the basics of English and literature in return for all that he taught me. I wish him well, and I will not forget him.

Bonnie Faiman teaches language arts at Walsch Middle School in Framingham, Massachusetts.

The "Righting" Club:

Travails and Triumphs of a Community Writing Workshop

by

MICHAEL LARKIN

◆

I slide the creaking door open, and the van empties a passel of third-, fourth- and fifth-graders who run screaming to the door of the Activity Center. If I'm lucky, there have been no fights in the van, and no one is left wailing for his stray hat or glove. "Miss Tish! Miss Tish!" they cry out for one of my two co-teachers in visible winter breaths, "Let us in!" There is no answer.

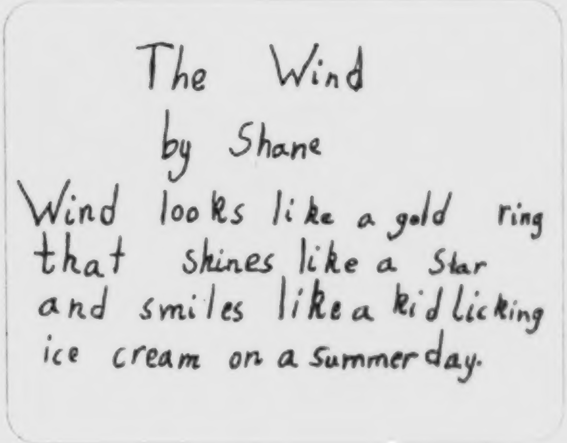
The dead street corner, six inches of snow masking uneven bumps of brick and asphalt, comes alive with kid adrenaline. Sherman and Roland throw headlocks around one another and giggle; Christy fogs Alicia's eyeglasses with the cold of a snowball; Sam denies that he likes Marcia for the umpteenth time and then steals her backpack; Stephen's eyes roll back in his head and he moans (possessed!); and tiny Collette mopes in the van, whispering in a mouse's voice that she never wants to come again, but I know that she will be back next week of her own volition, as always. I lift her out of the van and onto the sidewalk; she weighs no more than a half-dozen bird bones and a handful of air. The Writing Club is on the prowl.

Tish finally opens the door to the Activity Center, gives me a knowing grin, and the children burst inside. Alicia leads the way, screaming, and the chorus begins. Before long the kids are in full throat, bouncing hallelujah shouts off the vaulted ceiling of the Center's main hall, formerly a Methodist church sanctuary. The pitched voices hover at the roof's apex before rocketing down to us again. My other co-teacher, Liz, has her baby son, Thomas, strapped papoose-style to her back; he likes what he hears and decides to join in with a delighted gurgle-shout. I could wonder what the kids and adults downstairs in the after-school room think of us, wonder if we're bothering them, but I have no time for that. I am shushing and rounding up kids like an Australian shepherd who's failed his training, and thinking about getting the kids to write lie poems today (inspired by Kenneth Koch's exercise in *Wishes, Lies and Dreams*).

Tell me a lie, Peter:

Poems of Lies I
I am 1,000,000,000 years old, and have bees in my teeth.
My step sister, Stinky, has roaches in her eyes.
My mom, Missy, has lions in her butt.
My step brother, Skinny, has hyenas in his nose.
And my step dad, Dirty, has fleas in his hair.

This is a happy memory, the kind at which one can look back from an amused distance and laugh about, the kind of experience one only tolerates or suffers through in real time, glad for the moments of humor or writing success that wrestle their way up like daisies rising through cracks in the sidewalk. It is indicative of my memories of my 24-week stint as a teacher of the once-a-week after-school writing program in Garfield, a working-class section of Pittsburgh. I was a first-time teacher, never having led a class as more than a visiting fiction writer and far removed from my experiences as a camp counselor and baby-sitter of younger kids as a teenager. I wanted to know what teaching kids to write would be like. I wondered whether I had anything to offer to them, whether I might make a good teacher. And there were times when I wondered what I had gotten myself into.



The Wind
by Shane
Wind looks like a gold ring
that shines like a star
and smiles like a kid licking
ice cream on a summer day.

October 1995

We've been brought together — Tish Rygalski (an elementary school teacher and poet), Liz Perry (a writer and volunteer at the Activity Center), and yours truly — by the Western Pennsylvania Writing Project to lead the workshop. The idea is for us to come to the Javon Thompson Community Activity Center, owned by the non-profit Bloomfield-Garfield Corporation (BGC), on Thursday afternoons and lead the third- through fifth-grade kids who drop by through a series of creative writing exercises. I feel the need to have every detail prepared and ready, but my co-teachers, who have experience teaching children as well as undergraduates, feel confident after our brief discussions that we'll plan a few exercises and play it by ear once we see who shows up and how things go. I defer to their experience, though I'm a bit anxious not knowing more about how things will go, what it is that we're trying to accomplish. A writing group has never been offered at this community center before; there is no model, no concrete goal that I've heard articulated. I'm thinking, "Surely the Activity Center lined up kids who've got an interest in doing some creative writing before they roped us in?" though now I'm not so sure.

October 26

After an introductory session the previous week for kids at the Activity Center, today was the first full class, with fifteen kids attending, about half of whom were already at the Center while, to expand the group's size, we've brought down others from Fort Pitt, the nearby elementary school where Tish teaches. The kids have come for varying reasons: some because they're bored with being downstairs in the Activity Center's main room, some because they've worked with Tish the previous year in a smaller writing group at Fort Pitt, some because their friends are trying out the group, and still others because they have evinced some interest in writing. It seems that most of the kids have become involved at the nudging of one of the after-school organizers, and that at least at this stage, no one has parents who have pressed them to come here or who are even aware that their kids are doing creative writing after school.

The cavernous room, peopled by folding chairs and a few creaking tables, provides ample space but is dimly lit from lights high on the ceiling. The room is drafty and loud (the latter condition owing to noisy heating ducts), and if more than a few people are speaking (or screaming) at once, the room poses obstacles to producing a quiet and writing-friendly environment. One of our first challenges will be learning how to manage our young group in this airy space that is better suited to a basketball game or a revival meeting than it is to writing.

By the time we've settled in and introduced ourselves in a game designed to get everyone to learn each other's name — saying our names and a word with the same first letter to describe ourselves ("I'm Mike and I'm marvelous"), and then repeating the names and words of every person who precedes us — we've only got ten minutes or so of our hour left to write. We've started a collaborative ghost story for Halloween from the previous week, and so I stand up to try my hand at getting this larger group to finish it. The kids are eager and full of suggestions, and I quickly write down as much as I can, integrating suggested plot lines and asking for vivid adjectives and verbs to give the story more particular details. There are mild disagreements and arguments ("I don't like this story, it's not scary"), but we muddle through several sentences before it's time to pack up and shuttle the Fort Pitt kids back to their school where their rides will be waiting for them. One thing becomes readily apparent in these young storytellers: these kids are cut-to-the-chase-types. It was all I could do to keep the climax out of the story's first line. These guys wanted the story's bang, and they wanted it *now*. The practice of narrative restraint seems like something to be worked on in helping these kids develop their stories, although I remember a time when I too craved instant gratification, comic books and fruit drinks of an unnatural blue.

November 9

The previous week we gave the kids notebooks in which they've written their own scary stories, and today they are writing using "The Story Machine," an exercise where they get short character descriptions and situations from other students and then write a story using those prompts. Though they do get some work done, the hyper, playful behavior of the kids and the logistics of getting half the group to and from the Fort Pitt school make it difficult.

In particular, we have two children I've taken to calling "the catalyst kids," those kids who are boisterous, unable to settle down, and who prod others to such behavior. Today and for the foreseeable future, this means Charles and Ranelle.

The practice of narrative restraint seems like something to be worked on in helping these kids develop their stories, although I remember a time when I too craved instant gratification, comic books and fruit drinks of an unnatural blue.

They are both attention-seekers. Charles is a handsome, athletic boy who jokes with his male friends and teases the girls in classic preadolescent displays of repulsion as affection. He is here to be with his friends and blow off steam after school, and he writes absolutely nothing, even as a few of his friends bear down on their notebooks. He is the kind of boy who will kick a girl in the leg under the table and then deny he's done so over the girl's protests. I give him a look and he knows I know he's lying; I've seen what he's done with my own eyes. He gives me a sheepish grin and turns his attention to one of his scribbling buddies.

Ranelle makes it her business to distract everyone. She sees to it that it is never quiet and that someone is always being bothered, willfully or not. She holds forth at a lectern in the old sanctuary, her constantly running voice booming off the high ceiling, a sugary sweet cherub's smile on her face. When she is through there, she tries to stab another girl with a pencil, kisses several half-reluctant boys and then finishes it off with singing while performing a miniature bump-and-grind dance, hips gyrating in emulation of singers from rap and soul videos. All in all, an inappropriately sexual display for a ten-year old. No amount of attention, separation, gentle cajoling or stern, angry threats of discipline seems to do the trick with her. I find out later that Ranelle is on some kind of medication, though I never discover what.

And while these kids appear to have every intention of returning, others who might prove to be capable writers do not.

Shin's grandmother has gotten wind of the scary stories we've written in previous weeks and is insisting that Shin not attend the Writing Club any more, after only three short weeks. Shin's grandmother sits downstairs on a couch in the middle of the Activity Center, amidst children studying, reading and playing. She apparently spends this time each day quietly lending a watchful eye to Shin's otherwise parentless afternoon. She is convinced that the proceedings going on upstairs are nothing short of Satanic. I cannot easily convince her to change her mind, since she speaks only her native Chinese, and Shin does not want to translate for her. After class I speak to Shin's mother, who seems content to allow Shin to stay in the group. However, Shin's stoic grandmother reigns supreme from her perch on the couch, and Shin is out. His writing is syntactically a mess, but he is eager to stay and is disappointed. I am sorry to lose him.

November 30

We've lost some of our Fort Pitt boys (at least temporarily) to the school's basketball team, whose coach is reluctant to make accommodations that will allow the boys to skip out early on practice one afternoon a week. But for a few diehards from the Activity Center, we are faced with a dwindling group of students, and so we've roped in students from another nearby school, Friendship Academy. With the ever-changing makeup of the Writing Club's membership, each week feels like it's the first. My initial hopes of crafting a curriculum that would allow students to build from week to week on what they've learned about creative writing have been quickly dashed.

To ease the process of getting started on time, I have also added a new wrinkle to my job description — van driver — making the rounds to the two schools to pick up ten to fifteen hyper kids and bring them to the Activity Center in the BGC's old van. (And let me say this: whatever we pay elementary school bus drivers, it's not enough).

> ***We are constantly trying to balance our desire to make writing fun for the kids with reining in their desire for roughhouse play so that they can actually get time to write.***

The Writing Club seems to be an option rather than a commitment for many of the kids. They attend as it suits them, subject to their interest in a variety of other after-school choices available to them (sports, drama, architecture, dance, etc.), and because of this, it is difficult to set up a consistent structure or to enforce any real discipline with consequences other than bouncing the kids out of the club if they seriously misbehave. Removing kids from the club is the last thing we want to do. We are constantly trying to balance our desire to make writing fun for the kids with reining in their desire for roughhouse play so that they can actually get time to write. Our need for some kind of understanding of how the Writing Club is going to operate led us to enjoin the children today to help us draft...THE RULES:

Attendance
Respect
Thoughtful Listening
Seriousness

I shudder a little bit when I look at the rules independently of knowing the thought that went into them as we and the kids crafted them. But using the acronym ARTS as a focal point for pedantic discipline? The R(espect) and T(houghtful Listening) aren't so bad, but A(ttendance) and S(eriousness) can seem somehow oppressive. Seriousness? Talk about a means of putting the kibosh on any youthful enthusiasm. Have I become one of my junior high teachers, who were forever recounting the rules of their classrooms and the trespasses that would earn us detention? Is the spirit of a stern Methodist God still hovering inside the house his followers have vacated? But art *is* a kind of discipline. And seriousness as we defined it doesn't mean a dour, starched-collar adherence to some kind of writing by rote. We want the kids to *attend regularly*, *respect* themselves and others, in part by *listening thoughtfully* when their teachers or fellow writers are talking or reading, and to be *serious* about trying to write, a seriousness which leaves plenty of room for giggling, silly rhymes and the playing of word games just for fun. So, leery as I am of new students seeing the rules for the first time and taking them out of context, I am planning on writing the rules each week in a corner of the chalkboard. Love them or not, the rules do give us something concrete to turn to when we need a reference point to orient the kids as to what we've agreed on as proper behavior for our group.

Between introducing the new kids and setting up the rules, we didn't get much writing done today.

December 14

Our last meeting before the winter break. Tish has the kids write poetry using colors. We decide to split the group into three, with each of us working at a table with five or six children, rather than letting the children roam free, since this has worked well the previous week. This week the practice is less of a success. Charles, who is in my group, continues to refuse to write, and instead watches his friend Irv draw. He objects when I ask him leading questions to get him to write a poem about his stated favorite color — red. He wants to know why Irv gets to draw and why he has to write. I tell him that Irv can draw for now, but that eventually I'm going to want Irv to write me a poem or story about his picture so I can understand better what his drawing is about. Irv continues to draw and ignore both Charles and me. Peter, who has a learning disorder and who seems to alternate weeks between prolific production and a sleepy laziness, is in soporific mode today. Collette is moping, sure that people are making fun of her, and yet the main problem seems to be that no one is paying her any attention. As much as I'd like to attend to her concerns, Ranelle is in our group and

I know we're a few squirms and kisses away from sending our break-off group into the swirl of her tornado.

I decide to pull Ranelle aside and work one-on-one. She refuses to write, so I volunteer to take dictation, and she warms to this idea, though she doesn't want to write about her favorite color. Instead, she appropriates the beginning of a rhyme she's heard some of the other girls singing on the way over in the van. What's on your mind Ranelle?

Love
Love is sweet
Like a Piece of chocolate sugar
Don't mess with love
Cause love is sugar

Love makes people feel like cream
if you look at night and you think of cream you might see it
in every dream. Love is sweet like a piece of
chocolate sugar. If you look at love you might find
someone who likes watermelon.

January 11

Owing to the nasty blizzard that socked in most of the Eastern seaboard and the mid-Atlantic states, we are only now holding our first meeting in almost a month, and it feels as though we're starting anew. The group of kids who come directly from the Activity Center has dwindled to a faithful three, the Fort Pitt kids are holding at a steady half-dozen or so, while the Friendship kids round out the group in ever expanding and contracting numbers, usually around ten. It appears that the bulk of the kids in the Writing Club will continue to come from the two schools that were not the initial targets in the BGC's concept of whom would be served by a writing workshop. If we had relied solely on interest from the few kids of the right age who frequented the Activity Center, the Writing Club would have folded before it had a chance to truly begin. However, the BGC may not ultimately care which children come to its Activity Center, especially since a different goal is being served as part of a larger BGC vision for the Center: children from different Pittsburgh communities and schools — Garfield, Friendship, East Liberty, students from the school on the hill (Fort Pitt), and students from the school in the flats (Friendship) — are coming together, getting to know each other, and to a certain degree becoming friends and promoting tolerance of people from different neighborhoods whose various geographies serve as home to rival gangs of older kids.

> ***There have been two fights today, as well as an ongoing game of tag, a mumbled series of read-arounds by the kids, and a few interesting turns of phrase that give me hope.***

Today I've decided to go with a simple exercise. I ask the kids to each write a letter to a friend about what they've been up to in all the snow that's been falling. I tell them it can be completely truthful, or they can create a fictional character and make up some adventures they had in the snow. I read them two short examples I've written in advance, and then we split up to begin writing.

One of the older and more talented students, Wilt, came up with a letter which could easily have been used to describe the sporadic nature of our early weeks at the Writing Club:

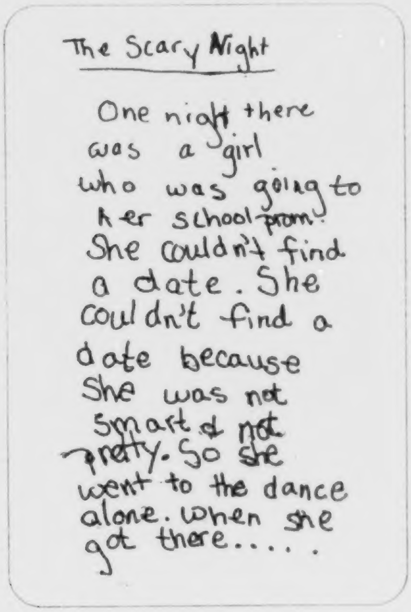
My Wacky Winter

Dear Eron,
How are you? Is it snowy where you live? The most amazing thing happened to me on Monday. A snow man was running down the street. And there was a reindeer chasing a man in polka dot boxers, plus jack frost was freezing down town. Eron, I tell you this was one wacky winter. That night the three spirits of Christmas past, present, and future visited me. When I woke up, Santa was sitting on my sofa, and Rudolph was drinking cocoa in my kitchen. It was crazy! Turtle doves flew in my living room, and elves were making toys in the hallway. Everything was mixed up! Well, I'm packing my bags and moving to California. Just hope it's not crazy.

Your Friend,
Aaron
P.S. Write back

January 18

Often while flitting around and giving quick help to various students, I feel as if I'm performing literary triage — brief moments of success amidst a wash of chaos, with time to focus on only the most basic of comments. This is perhaps worthwhile in and of itself, but it's frustrating to me and I constantly have the expectation that I can and should be doing more. I know there are some kids with whom I could make leaps and bounds if I only had the whole sixty or ninety minutes just to work with them. And though we try to structure one-on-one time periodically, it's difficult to do so effectively over such a short period and with so many kids clamoring for attention. Yet the writers keep coming, even as others drop out, and I suppose that's as good a sign as any.



The Scary Night

One night there
was a girl
who was going to
her school prom.
She couldn't find
a date. She
couldn't find a
date because
she was not
smart & not
pretty. So she
went to the dance
alone. When she
got there. . . .

Right now it's a quiet moment after the Writing Club. This is the time where I discover what the kids have accomplished in gaps between the cacophony. There have been two fights today, as well as an ongoing game of tag, a mumbled series of read-arounds by the kids, and a few interesting turns of phrase that give me hope. Carmel walks by with a crinkled face like she's just tasted mercury, and I know that she's still feeling the after-effects of having been sprayed with a fire extinguisher by Collette. She smiles at me and I know she's OK, but I find myself looking at her dirty white turtleneck that she's worn for several Thursdays in a row and wondering if it's just her Thursday shirt or if she wears it most other days as well because she doesn't have enough warm clothes. I'm sifting through ripped notebooks and pages brushed gray by pencil strokes, trying to get a handle on how much revising the kids need to do. I'm looking at the word "fwlaebow" in Jeremy's notebook and deciding it might translate as "full by now," when Alexa wanders by and tells me that she's stopped coming to the Writing Club because she thinks it's boring. I feel the pang of failure in a quick flash. I don't know whether she's bored by the pace at which we go, or by the exercises we give the kids to do, but she obviously likes to write; she has several pages full, most of it done on her own time at the Activity Center. I tell her she's a great writer and that we miss her (and we do). She reconsiders and says she'll come next week. I don't know if she will or she won't, but right now she proudly shows me her cheerleading picture and tells me she's just had her tenth birthday. Sing her happy birthday, Christy:

Bappy Earthday!
There's a tangle in my tungle
And I can't rack tight,
And I reel so feelie bungled
That I set a book a light!

But I'm getting all invited,
'Cause the farty will be pun
Which you graciously excited me
To come to, sane or run

So I gapped a little rift
Yes I lipped a riddle gaffe…
(When I sing Bappy Earthday,
Don't let Benny Uddy laugh.)

January 25

No Alexa. Cheerleading, it turns out, has claimed her total attention.

Tish asks the kids to write poems about dreams they've had, reading them several examples and then, if the kids are stumped on how to begin, she gives them cards with word prompts on them such as "ocean" or "castle" or "cave." We split into groups again to write, and though most of the kids seem to get a decent start, I am unable to write anything of my own, leading me to again wonder about the kid's perceptions (or expectations) of my production versus their own.

Several other thoughts occur on this generally successful day:

Poetry is "easier" to teach kids than fiction writing in the context of a workshop like ours, if only because poems can be completed more readily by the kids in a shorter amount of time. In fiction writing, the kids often need to go back and fill in jumps in logic and narrative or to elaborate stories beyond a monotonous telling of the facts about a trip to the store. This requires time for revision, a task the kids are often loathe to undertake, except to correct spelling and perhaps add a few new lines. Also, in their writing of stories, the kids still evidence a desire to get to the climax quickly, throwing the pivotal revelation into their tales within the first few lines. In a few cases, I've been able to point this out to kids and have them try to add more details nearer the beginning, though as often as not, they're frustrated by my even asking, no matter how much praise I heap on the story.

Also, it's important to maintain a balance between a stimulating flexibility (both in the way the class is run and in the exercises we choose to give the kids) and a recognizable structure. Splitting up the class into smaller groups works on some weeks, but not on others, depending on the kids' moods, and we adjust each week accordingly. Having a regular structure allows the kids to recognize when it's time to be "serious" and when it's OK to let loose. For a period of several weeks, we had been concluding each meeting with a read-around, each child reading to the group what he or she had written that day. Today, we decided to do an early read-around, with the intent of doing a little more writing afterward before we brought things to a close for the day. However, the kids have grown accustomed to the read-arounds being a concluding moment, after which they begin to run and scramble madly for their coats and generally blow off steam in a display that I call the "Jog 'n Scream." We sent the wrong signal today with the early read-around, and the kids started their Jog 'n Scream. Suffice it to say, workshop ended a little early.

February 1

After class and dropping off the students, I walk with Shantel back from the parking lot where I leave the BGC van and then make my way back to the Activity Center before heading for home. Shantel is one of the older students, and though she enjoys playing and goofing off as much as the other kids, she also evidences a desire to display her maturity, offering to help set up and clean up each week that she attends. She's not the best student, but she tries, and for this reason she is one of my favorites.

A wild gust of wind comes up from behind us and sends us skipping a few steps ahead on the sidewalk. Shantel says, "Whoa, it's like the wind is telling us to hurry up, like it wants us to get along." I tell her what a wonderful image she's just created and that she should write it down in her notebook when we get back to the Activity Center. She's pleased that I've recognized her off-hand simile and she flashes a smile that could light a city. The notebooks have been put away, and when we arrive back at the Center, Shantel's ride is waiting for her, so I don't know that she's bothered to write down her comparison. I make a mental note to remind her of it the next week.

February 15

There is generally a bias against rhyme in poetry nowadays, and I have seen some teachers discourage children from rhyming. I can see the desire to have children realize the possibilities in poetic writing outside of rhyming, but in the Writing Club, the other teachers and I found that allowing the kids to rhyme (last week and today) was a particularly freeing exercise. Some kids wrote poetry, some wrote raps, others sang songs. It got a little raucous at today's session, since we had about twenty kids in attendance, but most of the kids (at least those among our solid core of a dozen or so regulars) got some good work done. One quickly sees the joys that come from creating a rhyme. At the elementary school age level, I think it helps to let the kids loose to rhyme if they want to, and then encourage unrhymed poetry as well later:

WIZ
by Lauren

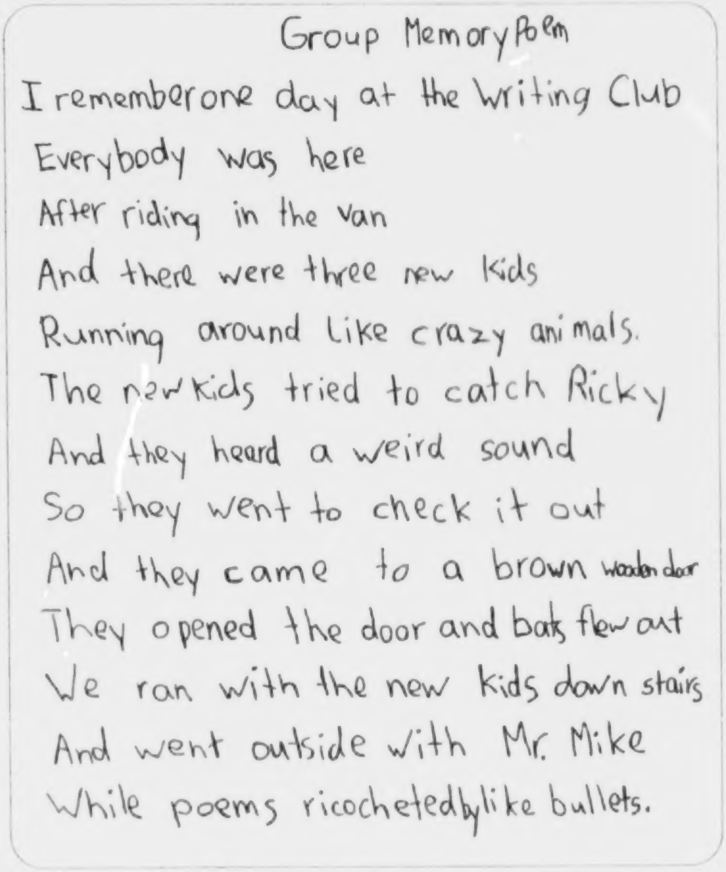
If you had a wiz,
and he started to fiz, you would
have a wiz with fiz. If
the wiz had some hiz, you
would have a wiz with fiz,
that has some hiz. If the
wiz got some biz, you would
have a wiz with fiz,
some hiz,
got some biz. If the
wiz got dizzy, you would
have a wiz with fiz,
some hiz, some biz,

and got dizzy. If the wiz
fell down you
would have a wiz with fiz,
that had some hiz, got
some biz, that got dizzy
and fell down.

The End

February 22

Flu and after-school basketball have whittled our ranks to a half-dozen kids today, so I forgo the planned exercise of writing about memories and instead choose to try the silly simile game, which I've taken from Eve Shelnutt's book, *The Magic Pencil*. I give each of the kids three note cards of three different colors. On the first, a yellow card, I ask them to put down a person place or thing. On the blue cards, I ask them to put down an "action word" (a verb). And on the final cards in pink, I have them put down a comparison phrase beginning with "like" or "as." Collette, Jeremy and Alicia all vie to pass out and collect the cards, and this is just one case in many I have seen of the kids wanting to be involved in the process of helping to execute a writing exercise before the actual writing begins. It's a form of ownership, I think, as they might own something they've written. There is always a fine balance between teacher control and allowing the children a measure of responsibility. It's a small group, so I allow them to pass out and collect the cards, and it pleases them to no end.



Group Memory Poem

I rememberone day at the Writing Club
Everybody was here
After riding in the van
And there were three new kids
Running around Like crazy animals.
The new kids tried to catch Ricky
And they heard a weird sound
So they went to check it out
And they came to a brown wooden door
They opened the door and bats flew out
We ran with the new kids down stairs
And went outside with Mr. Mike
While poems ricochetedbylike bullets.

The cards are shuffled, and Christy draws one of each. "A cavity smells like a wastebasket," she reads, and people start to laugh. Carmel reads hers, "The teacher rains like two people kissing," and the laughter gets louder. Randy reads one that ends "like my cousin," that falls a little flat, and so I ask Randy which comparison is more vivid: "like my cousin" or another that's been read earlier ending "as smooth as silk." He votes for "like my cousin." When I ask why, he says "because I can see what my cousin looks like." I ask him how people will know how his cousin looks or acts if "like my cousin" is all they have to go on, whereas comparing the softness of something to silk is a simile that more people will be able to relate to, since more people will have felt silk than met Randy's cousin. Right?

"Oh," Randy says. I fear I've lost him, but whether he gets my point or not, he picks up several combinations of cards whose similes he likes and decides to "storyboard" them into a poem. I'm pleased at least that this future Hollywood director has enjoyed the game.

Shantel, who isn't here today, will demonstrate in writing (as she has in describing our pushy wind of a few weeks ago) that she's got both an ear for vivid comparisons and a knack for conveying just how early our winter started:

Fall
Fall is fantastic
because of
the snow
that is white
that covers things
like rooftops
like white flowers
that smell beautiful

in the dark. It's like
jewelry that is green
and purple mixed
flowers
that mix when
they bloom and
smell like soup
that is called
Roses.

March 21

With six weeks to go (including this one), Tish, Liz and I are getting concerned about the kids not having enough completed writing to put into the book we're planning on printing up in early May. We decide that two of us will hold individual conferences while the third teacher leads the rest of the kids in a writing exercise. This works for about twenty minutes before the other kids begin to invade their fellow writers' one-on-one time.

Before being interrupted, I had some time to consider the invented spellings conundrum. I was working with a third-grader, Jeremy, who has tremendous difficulty with spelling, to the point where it sometimes becomes difficult for me to figure out what he is writing. I have had individual discussions in the past with Jeremy and some of the other kids about their misspellings, and early on I tried to keep things loose in altering their "invented" language when it was misspelled. However, the pending production of the Writing Club book at the end of the school year and our limited time for one-on-one meetings puts pressure on us to get permission from the kids to spell check their writing when we type up their work for them and don't have time to go over the misspellings word by word with them. We want the kids to learn actively from their mistakes, but we also don't want to embarrass them in front of friends and family with their misspellings in print. Working patiently with invented spellings seems a useful approach as long as one has extended time in a classroom or at home, but with a once-a-week workshop it's not realistic, except on a small scale. Once again, I find myself frustrated that I can't spend more time alone with students like Jeremy, but Ranelle has slipped in to plant a kiss on his cheek and Collette is (literally) climbing the walls.

March 28

I had the opportunity earlier this week to observe two other student-teachers, Julie Albright and Melanie Harris, each of whom spends an hour every week visiting classrooms and leading writing workshops at the Pittsburgh Urban Christian School in nearby Wilkinsburg. Each Wednesday morning, Julie works with a class of a dozen fourth-graders, while Melanie takes over a first-grade class of about eighteen students. In talking to them before I got a chance to visit their writing workshops, I noticed that they seemed to be encountering similar difficulties to ours — hyperactivity and distractions which are probably endemic to trying to teach children and ultimately surmountable — but they also did not seem to be having the same degree of difficulty in keeping control of their classrooms and having productive writing that we were having at the Activity Center. Curious, I sat in on each of their visits on Wednesday morning, working with a few students in each class while either Julie or Melanie led them in a writing exercise.

Now that I've had a chance to see the differences between our community center workshop and their school-based workshop, I wonder about the efficacy of integrating a weekly writing workshop into a classroom versus setting one up outside school at a location like the Activity Center. I found the students in Melanie's and Julie's classes for the most part to be eager and involved in their writing. They were full of ideas and wanted to see them on paper. There was little prompting that I needed to do in the group of fourth-graders with whom I worked to get them to imagine a made-up family. The kids at the Writing Club have shown that they have active imaginations as well, but they sometimes need more prompting and have a harder time getting focused.

Part of the explanation for this may be that the kids at Pittsburgh Urban are getting writing time with an outside visitor as a kind of imaginative break from the regular curriculum, while the kids at the Writing Club have already run through the day's academic lessons by the time we have them. My kids are in after-school play mode, so they don't necessarily want to do something that resembles school at four in the afternoon (nor do they want the controlled, disciplinary bounds that the classroom can provide). I see now that when we had visitors come to our workshop back in January, the kids thought of the visitors as *writers* and of Tish, Liz and me as *teachers*. This isn't necessarily an argument against organizing writing workshops for kids that take place in after-school, community settings, especially since a workshop like the Writing

Club can help children to imagine writing outside the bounds of the classroom. Rather, it's an observation of why, in the course of a child's school-day rhythm that progresses from schoolwork to play time to home life, in-classroom workshops may be more effective than after-school programs in prompting *young* writers to write, and why having at least occasional visits from outside writers — whether to the classroom or the community workshop — is important for elementary school-age students. In Ken Koch's *Wishes, Lies and Dreams* and Alan Ziegler's *The Writing Workshop* (both great sources for writing exercises for children), the authors were, after all, having their great, enviable successes with writing exercises for kids as *visitors to the classroom* during the school day.

Having said all of that, the individual conferences today go much more smoothly than the previous week, with a decent number of kids getting personal time with Liz or Tish, and there is a period of about twenty-five minutes when there is near total silence while the kids write up lie poems, many of which turned out to be quite creative and funny. At one point during this quiet period of production and repose, Tish comes out of one of the two conference areas to get another student and says to me, "I've never heard it this quiet. How did you do it?"

"I have no idea," I say. "Dumb luck."

April 11

Spring fever has sprung on this gorgeous day. This was probably the roughest class yet, not only in terms of what got accomplished, but also in terms of raucousness and noise. It's days like this that I feel as though I'm doing little more than baby-sitting. A couple of fights broke out, two kids were disgruntled that their designs for the Writing Club book cover were not chosen, and a general desire to be outside reigned on what was the nicest weather we've had in the five and a half months we've been meeting. The only problem with being outside is that there is no good place to go, since the Activity Center sits on the corner of two moderately busy streets and there's nothing much outside except the urban environment of asphalt streets and cement sidewalks as front yards, and we're mostly worried about a kid getting hit by a car.

Into this roiling mix came a visiting poet, Karen Themstrup, a fellow graduate student and instructor at the University of Pittsburgh. Karen had a chance to work with several students and to comfort one who began crying after a fight. Afterward, she seemed both dazed and energized by the experience: dazed by the noise of the kids and all of their angry activity, and energized by some of the kids' work. She worked with Ranelle and was a little shocked by the over-eroticized nature of a love poem Ranelle had chosen to write that day about all the squeezable boys in the Writing Club. She liked the excitement Sam and Stephen generated when they collaborated on two Sherlock Holmes stories, and she was impressed with some of the language in one of Stephen's poems, written a few weeks earlier:

> *The sky is sky blue and*
> *the house chimney is brick red and*
> *the jungle is jungle green and*
> *it is like dark black grass and*
> *my carpet is carpet brown*
> *the forest is forest green*
> *the diamond shines like the sun and*
> *the gravity in space pulls me up and*
> *the electricity shivers me like*
> *snow and sound waves go in my*
> *ear*

I look at this poem, written by a boy who is usually among the most easily distracted in the Writing Club, and think that perhaps the kids have learned something in this long parade of weeks. Perhaps I have done some good.

May 18 — The Reading & Publication Party

Eleven of the seventeen kids who have contributed their work to the Writing Club book have shown up for a publication party at the nearby Lawrenceville Public Library, where they will read to an admiring audience of family, teachers and friends. One by one, they step onto the stage and read a story or a few poems they've written. Peter reads his lie poems and bends over at the waist laughing uncontrollably when he comes to his vivid line about his mother having "lions in her butt." Everyone in the room is laughing with him, except the woman who has brought him to the reading. There's a different lion that's going to be roaring before long.

Jeremy gets up and struggles through a story he's written. He can't recognize some of the words that I've changed into their correct spellings, and I lean forward to whisper my assistance to him. But before I can speak, two of the best writers, Lauren and Jeremy's older brother, Wilt, call out words to help Jeremy along, and as he gets closer to the end, he is buoyed by their help and by the encouraging words and laughter from the audience. He is pleased with himself and also visibly relieved to be done.

They each read — quietly or loudly, with confidence or reserve. I think back on all the months of the Writing Club: it's been stressful and frustrating and tiring as hell, and I feel tremendously proud of all of them.

Afterword

Whatever the mishaps, the pitfalls, and the frustrations of running a writing workshop of kids at an after-school community center, the kids who stuck around for more than a few weeks all ended up writing something interesting and worthwhile. All told, somewhere in the neighborhood of forty-five kids passed through the Writing Club for at least one week over the course of the Club's nearly seven-month duration; of those young writers, seventeen ended up publishing something in the book we completed. I find myself hoping that the kids have discovered some value in their own imaginative writing and a desire to continue it beyond the scope of our weekly ninety minutes of controlled chaotic creativity.

So what was the goal of The Writing Club? What did I hope to accomplish? I guess I hoped to turn some of the kids on to writing, or to encourage those who already had something of a bug to write more. I think we accomplished the latter, and of the former I'm not so sure. I also hoped to help kids to write better and more clearly. If nothing else, all the kids who came through wrote *something*, and that was a start. From the beginning, I think my co-teachers and I also felt we had to get the kids to finish things, to complete works that they (and we) could show to people — whether parents, teachers, grant funders, the community, or most importantly, to the kids themselves — so that the kids would know they had accomplished something. Thus the book of the kids' work that we cobbled together. All the while, the book was the only tangible goal of the workshop, and while it kept us focused on various other goals by association (cultivating the kids' imaginations; the need for revision and a diversity of voice; the importance of solid and preferably unique imagery; pursuit of proper spelling and grammar; just plain time for writing, etc.) it was perhaps a shame that we didn't state the goals of the workshop more explicitly from the beginning. Knowing those goals might have helped me to better assess how I did as a teacher, whether I succeeded at my task, rather than giving me the fleeting sense of accomplishment I feel. If nothing else, I have better learned how to manage a room full of kids, how to adjust when your plans go haywire and what to realistically expect from young writers in the framework of only ninety minutes of writing per week (in some respects, it's considerably more than one could expect from me). I even think I remember more of what it was like to be a kid, and this is perhaps the most valuable lesson of all.

A final word from Jeremy, in unADULTerated spelling:

The Righting Club

It was a hot day like
today at the righting club.
Mr. Mike sad we are
going out side to right
snins it was so hot today.
Ms. Titsh rote backe and
frute of 18 pags. Mr Mick
did 45000 pags. Alxisse
did a backe flipe down the
shret she wasn't tiyrde
Sene I
Sene 2
folle was comeming we
were still at work righting
the books are fwlaebow.
righting club was over and
we had fun there

Michael Larkin is a graduate student at the University of Pittsburgh and a Fellow of the Western Pennsylvania Writing Project.

Against All Odds:

Implementing a Middle School Writing Club

by

NANCY RENKO AND MARY WEAVER

◆

The level of excitement rose as the bus neared its destination. Despite moments of anxiety, thirty Webber middle-schoolers bubbled with anticipation. They were making the journey to Saginaw Valley State University Day Care Center where they would read their children's stories to the preschoolers.

"Miss Weaver," exclaimed Shynesha, "do you have my story? I want to practice it."

She began in her delightful speaking voice, especially geared for small children:

> *It was a nice bright, sunny day in the land of fruit land. Princess Strawberry had just received a letter from her mother Queen Blueberry. She was so surprised and shocked at the same time. She thought her mother had died when she was just a little girl.*

At the same time Donald, who was seated directly behind Shynesha, competed, reading loudly:

> *Boom! went the thunder. Flash went the lightning. Down came the rain. It came down so hard not even the biggest eyes could see in it.*

At the university the teenagers joined the young children in small groups around the picnic table and under the trees. The lawn was covered with circles of small fries and storytellers.

The preschoolers listened in rapt attention to Janelle as she read:

> *There's a boy named Willie Swilley. All people in town call him "rhyming Willie," because everything he says rhymes. One day Willie was talking to his best friend Billy. As they walked to the school house, Willie said to Billy, "You look silly."*
>
> *"Why do you say that Willie?" said Billy.*
>
> *"Because your shoes are red and your shirt looks like my bed. Look here comes Fred."*

Janelle smiled shyly as she realized how much the children were enjoying her story and her wonderful color illustrations.

Monica seemed almost as tiny as the preschool day care children who were listening to her story. She read the words that she had laboriously penned for many weeks at school. All eyes were upon her as she shared her story about the birth of her cousin, Da'Corion.

> *He was asleep for a long time. When he woke up he began to cry because he was hungry. He was a pretty baby. Da'Corion had a brother named De'Ondre. They are really close to each other.*

Despite her small stature, she had grown in leaps during the school year. Monica was visually impaired, legally blind without her glasses. She had been in a special education classroom for most of her elementary schooling. As a seventh-grader, she was placed in an inclusive classroom, but it wasn't until she joined the Webber Middle School Writing Club that she began to blossom.

One of us, Mary Weaver, came up with the idea for the Writing Club while participating in the Saginaw Valley Writing Project summer institute. She wondered what she could bring back to students to enhance their learning. "I wanted my students to develop a love for writing, to immerse themselves in writing as I did during the summer institute," noted Mary. The idea of a writing club was born.

Collaborating with another writing project fellow, Natalie Tucker, we were ready to start. But how, we wondered, would we make this idea real?

"Do you really think anyone would show up?" Nancy wondered. The question arose from a feeling that sometimes overwhelmed us: that as language arts teachers, we had been fighting a losing battle, teaching writing to middle-schoolers who were consumed with other issues.

Saginaw, according to a 1996 University of Michigan study, is ranked as the seventh most segregated city in the United States. In the same year, David Rusk, an urban policy consultant, identified Saginaw as one of the twenty-four poorest cities in the country. Poverty, gang activity, drug use and the economics of single-parent families struggling to survive affected our students' academic performance.

We wondered if we were naive to try to start a club that had writing as its focus. Who would be interested in a club that did not offer the competitive excitement of sports or the fevered frenzy of a gang initiation? Would students care enough to spend their spare time writing? Would the peer pressure against such an academic activity prevent even the studious children from participation?

We knew if we didn't try we would never know the answers, so we decided, against all odds, to go for it. Webber Middle School Writing Club was to become a reality.

But other questions remained. Natalie wondered, "When will we meet?" We couldn't meet after school because the streets were not safe at the hour the students would be leaving. Mary pushed for lunch time. Nancy wondered if other activities such as Step Club, basketball, movies, or that favorite middle school noontime activity — pursuing the opposite sex — might decrease our membership. But we didn't have a choice. We agreed to try meeting during lunch hours. We placed announcements on the teachers' chalkboards, "Writing Club meets on Tuesdays in Room 216." We encouraged teachers to advertise during middle-school advisory period.

We wondered if we were naive to try to start a club that had writing as its focus. Who would be interested in a club that did not offer the competitive excitement of sports or the fevered frenzy of a gang initiation?

On that first Tuesday, seven students shyly filed into room 216. Not surprisingly, these first ones were the students left out of noontime intramurals and flirting activities.

We began with an icebreaker prompt: "If you could be an animal, which would you choose to be?"

Javiel asked, "How do you spell 'Jaguar?'"

"Oh! Oh! What is the name of an animal that has scales and a long nose?" asked Tiffany.

Monica just sat and watched.

So began our great adventure: creating a literate middle-school environment where students engage in discussion and share humor and learning. We demonstrated and participated with our students in reading response groups. We modeled "What do you mean ..." questions and "Show-don't-tell" admonitions.

Students began using these strategies. "What did you mean when you say, 'he never made anyone feel bad?' Could you show not tell this?" Tiffany asked her partner.

One day Tashannon, a quiet, tentative girl, peeped in Room 216 to see who was there. Her hunched shoulders made her look shorter than she was. Encouraged by Leslie's ready, toothy smile and Christian's warm welcome, she entered. After the initial group appeared, this is how most of the students joined our club, hesitantly, one at a time. The sense of community gained in the Writing Club fulfilled a deeply felt need for our little band of outsiders.

But then the character of the club began to change. A few boys, wearing Nikes and low slung pants, initials carved into their closely shaven heads, crossed the threshold asking to join. Why did this happen? We never asked. "Why are *you* coming to a Writing Club?" hardly seemed an appropriate question. It may have been that by this point in the school year the regular noontime routines were losing their fascination. But we think the main attraction of the Writing Club for these kids was the lure of the computers. Whatever baggage the concept of a "writing club" might have carried was offset by the attractions of technology.

The seven shy students became leaders who basked in the knowledge of understanding how the computers functioned and how words came alive on their papers. Rakeesha showed the new club members how to change fonts and print sizes, causing a deluge of imaginative design. We had to restrict student creativity by allowing them to print only one copy, as they tried artistic renditions of every text.

Suddenly our ranks were swelling. Word got out that the Writing Club was FUN!

Unlike a class, the pressure was off. Students could come with their friends and stay away on the days they needed to do something else. If they were absent for two weeks, they would be welcome on their return. There were no grades. Students could choose their own topics, try out different types of writing, experiment with dialogue, and generally be creative. We maintained a casual atmosphere which allowed conversation to occur and friendships to emerge, and most importantly we fostered a spirit of community. What went on in Room 216 became transformational.

The promised trip to Saginaw Valley became a great motivator toward nudging students to show up and complete their work. It was the early birds who got first crack at the computers, but beyond that, our shared goal of a successful performance at the day care center had a dramatic and positive effect on the group's energy level. As we looked around the room, we saw twenty students reading their pieces to each other, drafting on the computer, editing each other's work and helping each other to expand computer skills. We watched as Karim proudly read his draft, "How Snakes Are," to a group of seventh-grade boys. We became award of our audience. "Jennie, your story is good but too long. You have to shorten it because little kids won't be able to listen to fifteen pages," observed Debra.

Meanwhile our computer guru Rakeesha was showing students how to cut, copy and paste, real tools for revision. We realized that we could let the students lead.

Rakeesha surfaced as a genuine leader, asking engaging question about other students' work. She became the "coach" for some of the children who sometimes struggled with their thoughts and words. She helped Jennifer shorten her piece, and more than once smoothed out writing problems by showing students how to put a quote in the story or how to find the right adjective.

> ***Whatever baggage the concept of a "writing club" might have carried was offset by the attractions of technology.***

Monica, the girl who at our visit to the day care center was to write about the birth of her cousin, now dedicated her time to typing the "Preamble to the Webber Middle School Constitution" because copying other people's words was what she thought writing was. She desperately wanted to belong.

Although the Writing Club began with quiet, serious students, it became a noisy workplace with the addition of students like Roosevelt, a highly creative boy who could never sit still. He was always up and down, bouncing around and talking incessantly, except when deeply engrossed in drawing pictures of cars, portraits of people or beautiful renderings of a bridge. Jenny, on the other hand, was full of questions. She wrote volumes such as her fifteen-page cat story entitled, "The Life of Lau and Friends." Her biggest challenge was to keep the essence of the story while reducing its length. Another student, Henri, was a tough, street-wise kid who never completed a writing assignment in his language arts class. His children's story was about a penguin who was a child's pet. Illustrating his story with a lively penguin gave him the focus to produce his first finished piece. Meanwhile, Ahmand, who was very vocal, practiced eerie noises to go along with his ghost story.

Our students made another great leap forward when we brought in a "writer in residence." This was Diane Boehm, a children's book author with writing project affiliations.

Diane read with wonderful expression, making her children's story come alive as she shared it with our students. She taught the students to illustrate their completed stories for young children. She showed samples of trade books with wonderful pictures, explaining how the drawings and words came together on a page. Now that students were making pictures, Roosevelt, who had previously been up and down in his seat, became quiet and focused. Jerome delighted other students with his colorful drawings. When Monica saw other students illustrating their stories, she searched for a picture to share with the group. Since drawing did not come easily for Monica, she brought a photograph of her new born cousin. Rakeesha suggested that Monica write about her cousin and she did. For the first time, she went beyond copying text and composed her own words. She discovered her voice.

A few days later, the youngsters at Saginaw Valley State University Day Care Center listened as Monica and other club members read their stories. Soon their voices were joined by the giggling sounds of preschoolers enjoying Andre's poem, " The Boy Who Ate Saginaw":

There once was a boy, his name was John.
Instead of mowing the grass, he ate the lawn...

Why can't you be normal and go catch frogs.
I wonder what happened to Scruffy, our dog?
Don't eat the house, that's my rule.
You already drank all the water from the swimming pool.

Look! That kid just at the mall.
He just swallowed Saginaw.

The preschoolers laughed while the middle-schoolers beamed, their smiles infectious.

If we had ever entertained any doubts about the success of the Writing Club, they now vanished, melted by the warmth of our students in this celebration of writing. Despite the image with which our school was saddled, our students proved they were not just an underachieving, gang-oriented group of teenagers. Rather, they were a caring group of writers. Students came to the Writing Club because they found an accepting atmosphere in a safe environment away from the usual lunchroom chaos. The lure of technology pulled them in, but in the end it was the belief that they had something to say, their growing confidence as they established their voices, that transformed their views about writing and themselves.

Roosevelt went on to write an essay about Shirley Chisholm which took third place in the nation in a contest sponsored by the National Peace Foundation. Monica became aware of the power of words and the joy they can bring. She came to love writing so much that other teachers complained because she was working on writing stories in her science and math classes. She wrote poems about friends, family, and, much to their delight, classmates who sometimes became the main characters in her stories.

As pleased as we were about our success with the Writing Club, we were glad to be finished for the year. Our students had been so involved in the final project that we had munched sandwiches during lunch time editing conferences for two solid weeks, as we helped students publish their stories for the Saginaw Valley trip. We enjoyed our lunch hour on Monday, finally getting a much deserved break. But soon the principal's voice over the PA interrupted our leisurely meal; "Ms. Weaver, Mrs. Renko, Mrs. Tucker, you have about ten students in Room 216 for a Writing Club meeting."

We laughed. Were these students early for next year's meeting or were they unaware that Writing Club was over for the year? Somehow we knew that next year Writing Club would return—back by popular demand.

Nancy Renko and Mary Weaver are both members of the Saginaw Valley Writing Project.

Children as Writers in Literature

by

CHRISTINA FACCIOLI

◆

Kids, like the rest of us, find models in literature. Where is the child who wouldn't like to live the adventurous life of a Boxcar child? It follows then that one way to motivate young people to write is to introduce them to children's literature in which kids are writers. From my own broad background of reading as a child, surprisingly enough, I did not encounter many child writers. I do remember the title character in *Rosa too Little* by Sue Felt. Rosa practices diligently throughout the summer to learn to write her name to receive a library card of her own. As a children's librarian, that portrayal is near and dear to my heart, but it's about handwriting — something quite different from the creative process of writing. In fact, in children's literature before the 1980s, children rarely appeared as writers.

Of course, there was Jo from Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, scribbling away creating melodramatic plays for her sisters to perform and later submitting them as romantic, exotic tales to the penny press.

There were some novels written in the style of a child's diary or journal, to tell a historical story as a way of illustrating the customs and life-styles of a certain class or group in an earlier time. One such book is Joan W. Blos' *A Gathering of Days* (1979). The book's main character, Catherine, records in her diary entry of January 1, 1831:

> *'Turn about and each in turn! Now you shall watch and I shall cook and here's to the evening meal.' Thus Father announced a holiday in the New Year honour!*
>
> *How it regaled us, Matty and I, to watch his hands, so used to the plow, curve to women's implements and awkwardly employ them.*

Catherine's writing seems stilted, stiff and formal, nothing like a real child's diary. This may accurately imitate the language of the period, but it does little in helping today's reader feel the hilarity Catherine and Matty probably enjoyed as they watched their father struggle to make dinner. This "diary," which has been acclaimed by critics and adults, received the Newbery Award in 1980, but few children list it as a favorite, perhaps because of its lack of intimacy.

One of the few books from before the 1980s that does present children as writers in a positive view is the novel *Up a Road Slowly* (1966) by Irene Hunt. Julie is sent, after her mother's death, to live with her Aunt Cordelia and Uncle Haskell. Julie, even at a very young age, is fascinated by books and words and her aunt and uncle foster this interest in different ways. Aunt Cordelia, a high school English teacher, stresses the importance of grammar, mechanics, and usage in Julie's writing. Uncle Haskell, a slightly alcoholic ne're-do-well, urges Julie to use her imagination freely. As Julie matures under their supervision, so do her writing skills. As the novel ends, Julie is graduating from high school and intends to study journalism in college. The only odd note in this novel is that we never see a sample of Julie's writing. The reader learns that she has written something, that her aunt and/or uncle have proofed it, and that it has been accepted for publication, but the actual piece is never in the story's text.

But thankfully, over the last twenty years, the image of young writers in children's literature has changed dramatically. Writing, with its value as a communication tool, its power to present emotions, its ability to observe closely, its mechanics of style, and its creative inspiration, has become relevant in children's literature today and is portrayed more frequently.

While it is true that a generation ago children as writers appeared infrequently in books, this fact should be considered in the context of the times. Children's literature was then a small portion of the publishing business. A select handful of authors and illustrators were acclaimed for their work, but children's access to them was somewhat limited when compared to today. Paperbacks, an inexpensive way to reach a large audience, had not gained popularity in the classroom. Elementary schools often did not have a library for student use; instead, teachers maintained small classroom collections. On the whole, children's literature proved too small a market for publishers to take much notice.

During the 1970s this began to change. Elementary school libraries received direct funding from the federal government to build and expand their collections. With an expanded market with increased purchasing power, the publishing companies planned to supply and hold these new customers. More authors and illustrators were encouraged to submit their work and so more children's literature became available. Publishers wanted to build on their success, so as certain topics, titles, and authors became popular, they were promoted and encouraged.

During this same time, education was changing too. Teachers were looking for more authentic literature rather than relying on the basals. They introduced writing as a process for learning rather than as a simple assignment. Encouraging children to write for a variety of reasons in a myriad of styles became more and more something teachers adopted in their classrooms. Various writing projects within the states provided teachers with a framework, techniques and support, and introduced them to the joy that writing can provide. Teachers brought this excitement to their classrooms, and students responded — as well as the publishing community. Over the past twenty years, more and more books have provided students with age-appropriate, realistic characters who write.

Writing is a way people communicate. Two picture books that show this importance but also demonstrate how differently authors have presented this concept through the years are *Mr. Pine's Mixed-up Signs* by Leonard Kessler (1961) and *The Signmaker's Assistant* by Tedd Arnold (1992). Both books show the results that occur when a signmaker mixes up the placement of his signs. Kessler's book has a controlled vocabulary and sketchy yellow and black line illustrations. Arnold's book uses full color, detailed illustrations, and the text is not limited by reading level restrictions.

Another way to show the value of communication is to present children in books that feature correspondence—after all, everyone loves to get mail (although they aren't always prompt to respond). The picture book, *Stringbean's Trip to the Shining Sea* (1987) by Vera Williams, chronicles Stringbean's journey with his big brother from the Midwest to California. Each page is the postcard, canceled stamp attached, that Stringbean's parents receive.

Sometimes the letter writing presents only one side of the correspondence. The book, *The War Began at Supper: Letters to Miss Loria* (1991) by Patricia Reilly Giff, compiles the letters of a second-grade class who write to their recently departed student teacher, Miss Loria, just as the Persian Gulf War begins. The novel presents a variety of reactions from the children to the confusing and upsetting changes and worries in their lives. The book does not include any written responses from Miss Loria, although they are implied in some of the children's letters.

The picture book, *Dear Mr. Blueberry* (1991) by Simon James, does show both sides of a correspondence. Emily writes:

> *Dear Mr. Blueberry,*
> *I love whales very much and I think I saw one in my pond today. Please send me some information on whales, as I think he might be hurt.*
> *Love, Emily*

Mr. Blueberry, Emily's teacher, responds:

> *Dear Emily,*
> *Here are some details about whales. I don't think you'll find it was a whale you saw, because whales don't live in ponds, but in salt water.*
> *Yours sincerely, Your teacher, Mr. Blueberry*

Emily replies with:

> *Dear Mr. Blueberry,*
> *I am now putting salt into the pond every day before breakfast and last night I saw my whale smile. I think he is feeling better.*
> *Do you think he might be lost?*
> *Love, Emily*

Through the questions and answers that Emily and her teacher exchange, a picture of the creature in Emily's backyard pond emerges.

In the book, *Dear Annie* (1991) by Judith Casely, Annie is just an infant as the first letters arrive from her grandfather. As she matures, she becomes more involved in sending off each response. When she enters first grade, Annie proudly displays her eighty-six cards and letters as part of Show-N-Tell and inspires the rest of the class to become pen pals also.

An unusual correspondence takes place in a novel by Elvira Woodruff, *Dear Napoleon, I Know You're Dead, But…* (1992). Marty's class has been assigned to write to a famous person. Marty, although his teacher objects, writes to Napoleon. Everyone, including Marty, is astonished when he receives a reply via his grandfather's old age home. Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Edison, and Vincent Van Gogh are just some of the correspondents in this unusual novel.

Probably the most well known of all novels that feature children as letter writers is *Dear Mr. Henshaw* (1983) by Beverly Cleary. Leigh writes to author Henshaw simply to fulfill a classroom assignment:

> *September 20*
> *Dear Mr. Henshaw,*
> *This year I am in the sixth grade in a new school in a different town. Our teacher is making us do author reports to improve our writing skills, so of course I thought of you. Please answer the following questions.*
>
> *1. How many books have you written?*
> *2. Is Boyd Henshaw your real name or is it fake?*
> *3. Why do you write books for children?*
> *4. Where do you get your ideas?*
> *5. Do you have any kids?*
> *6. What is your favorite book that you wrote?*
> *7. Do you like to write books?*
> *8. What is the title of your next book?*
> *9. What is your favorite animal?*
> *10. Please give me some tips on how to write a book. This is important to me. I really want to know so I can get to be a famous author and write books exactly like yours.*

> *Please send me a list of your books that you wrote, an autographed picture and a bookmark. I need your answer by next Friday. This is urgent!*
> *Sincerely, Leigh Botts*

The correspondence that begins provides Leigh with a chance to write about his emotions and feelings during his parents' recent divorce:

> *Saturday, January 20*
> *Dear Mr. Pretend Henshaw,*
> *Every time I try to think up a story, it turns out to be something someone else has written, usually you. I want to do what you said in your tips and write like me, not like somebody else. I'll keep trying because I want to be a Young Author with my story printed (mimeographed). Maybe I can't think of a story because I am waiting for Dad to call. I get so lonesome when I am home alone at night when Mom is at her nursing class.*

With Mr. Henshaw's prompting and guidance, Leigh also begins to keep a journal.

> *December 13*
> *Dear Mr. Henshaw,*
> *I bought a composition book like you said. It is yellow with a spiral binding. On the front I printed*
> *DIARY OF LEIGH MARCUS BOTTS*
> *PRIVATE - KEEP OUT*
> *THIS MEANS YOU!!!!!*
>
> *When I started to write in it, I didn't know how to begin. I felt as if I should write, "Dear Composition Book," but that sounds dumb. So does "Dear Piece of Paper." The first page still looks the way I feel. Blank. I don't think I can keep a diary. I don't want to be a nuisance to you, but I wish you could tell me how. I am stuck.*
> *Puzzled reader,* Leigh Botts

Although Leigh has some problems at first recording his thoughts in his journal and creating a submission for the Young Authors contest, he is ultimately successful.

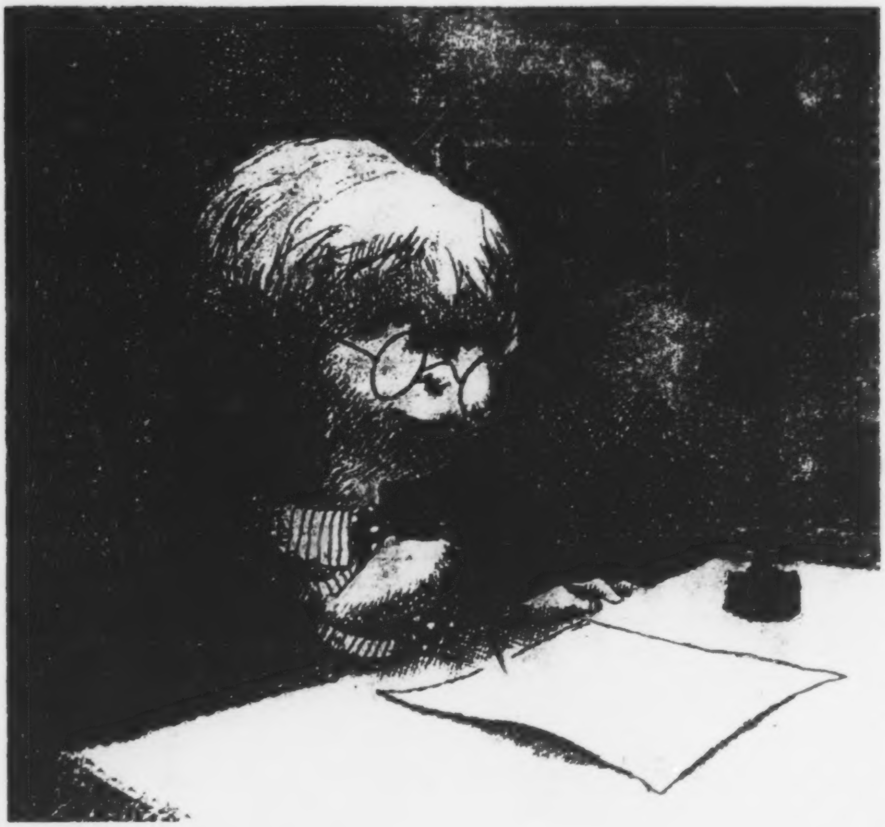
> *March 31*
> *Dear Mr. Henshaw,*
> *I'll keep this short to save you time reading it. I had to tell you something. You were right. I wasn't ready to write an imaginary story. But guess what! I wrote a true story which won Honorable Mention in the Yearbook. Maybe next year I'll write something that will win first or second place. Maybe by then I will be able to write an imaginary story. I just thought you would like to know. Thank you for your help.*
>
> *If it hadn't been for you, I might have handed in that dumb story about the melting wax trucker.*
> *Your friend, the author, Leigh Botts*
> *P.S. I still write in the diary you started me on.*

Cleary continued Leigh's story in a later book, *Strider* (1991), but here she has Leigh record his thoughts and emotions in a journal form throughout.

As we visit everyday life of a medieval English manor, the reader also learns of Catherine's complaints about mealtime, the dreariness of chores, and the lack of understanding from her mother. These same emotions and thoughts are expressed in contemporary novels.

Journals and diaries are still invaluable for showing children in an historical context, but authors today, while keeping the language and setting historically correct, also allow the child writer to express feelings and thoughts that are universal throughout the ages. Karen Cushmans' Newbery honor book, *Catherine, Called Birdy* (1994), is the journal of a girl in 1290. As we visit everyday life of a medieval English manor, the reader also learns of Catherine's complaints about mealtime, the dreariness of chores, and the lack of understanding from her mother. These same emotions and thoughts are expressed in contemporary novels like *Dear Mom, You're Ruining My Life* (1989) by Jean VanLeeuwen and *Memo: To Myself When I Have a Teenage Kid* (1983) by Carol Snyder. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Diaries and journals are often thought of as opportunities for personal reflection, expression, and close observation through writing that will not be read by others. But classroom journals, styles of notetaking,



writing to learn and writers' workshop have all been embraced by the classroom. These styles of writing are now shown in children's literature also. Characters in books now comfortably present themselves as writers, both within the plot and to the readers. Two characters that typify this trend are Anastasia Krupnik and Bingo Brown. Both are characterized by unique voices, humorous outlooks on life, realistic problems faced by many children, and the willingness to take some chances and experiment with different writing styles.

Throughout the series of Anastasia books by Lois Lowry, Anastasia experiments with writing lists, keeping notes of a science experiment, corresponding through an ad from the personals, writing a novel, preparing a resume, and serving as a junior journalist. Anastasia always has her green notebook ready.

> *'Reasons for becoming a Catholic,' wrote Anastasia in her green notebook.*
>
> *1. There are fourteen Catholics in the fourth grade, and four Jews, and everybody else is something else — I don't know what — but whatever it is is not very interesting. So I would make the fifteenth Catholic. And if ever they started a club or something, I would automatically be in it. That would be nice.*
>
> *2. And I would get a new name. Maybe at about the same time I get a new brother.*
>
> *Anastasia thought vaguely that probably there were other good reasons for becoming a Catholic. But she didn't know what the other reasons might be; and the ones she had listed seemed good enough."*

Bingo Brown, created by Betsy Byars, prepares an advice column for his newborn brother, writes to several girlfriends, and during each English class records his thoughts in his journal. But, like many students, Bingo can have a problem getting started:

> *It was English again, and Bingo sat staring at his sheet of paper. This was one of the assignments he had been looking forward to. This was the day they were writing to their favorite authors.*
>
> *Bingo had already decided he would write to Ray Bradbury and reveal to him that he had three science-fiction novels underway. Even though he still had only one paragraph done on each one, he figured Ray Bradbury did not get many letters from twelve-year-olds who have started three novels.*
>
> *However, the fact that Billy Wentworth was going to move next door to him occupied his whole mind. So far, Billy didn't know. Bingo could tell that from the way he said, "Hello, Worm Brain," in his usual way, but when Billy Wentworth did find out, he was not going to like it.*

> *The class had now been working on their letters for fifteen minutes. All Bingo had on his paper were two words.*
>
> Dear Ray,
>
> *Bingo sighed. He decided to do what he usually did in blank moments — sharpen his pencil and check out the other letters. He'd be very surprised if he saw any other Dear Rays.*
>
> *He got up. He knew he would have to walk very briskly so it wouldn't look suspicious. He passed one Lloyd Alexander, one Jean Fritz and one Dr. Seuss.*

Many of the techniques of the up-to-date writing classroom are represented in children's literature. Does this passage from *Write On, Rosy!* by Sheila Greenwald sound familiar?

> *"Your teacher, Mrs. Oliphant, is going to start a Young Authors' Program. Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday you will have an hour-long Writing Workshop beginning with a Mini-Lesson, ending with a Group-Share, and lots of time in between to write."*
>
> *Mrs. Oliphant pointed to a stack of folders. "You'll each have a folder in which to put your work," she said.*
>
> *"What's the topic?" Mary asked.*
>
> *"You will choose your own topics," Mrs. Oliphant said. "Fiction, nonfiction, science fiction, whatever you like. There will be tables set up at the back of the room for editing and revising and conferencing."*
>
> *Dr. Gormly beamed at us. "When your work is complete, you will publish by printing it neatly in real bound books. These will be displayed in the library and read by your classmates and teachers.*

This passage was taken from *Write on, Rosy!* (1988) by Sheila Greenwald and accurately represents what's happening in many classrooms today.

Although writing is honored and encouraged within the classroom, some novels show how writing plays a larger part within a child's family or community. In *Beans on the Roof* (1988), Betsy Byars shows how everyone, from young to old, can become a writer. Anne Bean composes a poem to be included in the classroom anthology while on the roof of her apartment building. One by one the others of her family join her there and are also inspired to write.

In *Save Halloween!* (1993) by Stephanie Tolan, Johnna feels honored and proud when her teacher asks her to write a play for the sixth grade to perform at Halloween to raise money for UNICEF. But this project disrupts the community when Johnna's evangelist uncle arrives and denounces Halloween as the devil's holiday. This thoughtful novel presents no easy answers and shows how words can convince, inspire, and influence others.

Any teacher who has planned or participated in an author's visit, or is thinking about doing so, should read Daniel Manus Pinkwater's picture book,* Author's Day (1993). *Pinkwater shows the visitation tongue-in-cheek, from the author's perspective.

Contemporary books not only show kids writing, they sometimes allow children to study and observe published authors at work. Schools today often sponsor author visits and children's literature reflects this.

A kind and understanding author helps Mary Maroney cope with her stuttering (*Mary Maroney Hides Out*, 1993, by Suzy Kline); Truman (Squinty) Gritt is honored when the visiting author selects his name to feature in her next book (*The Author and Squinty Gritt*, 1990, by Barbara Williams); and Mariah learns the lesson that "just because a book is entertaining, it doesn't mean the author will be," when an author visits her monthly club (*Mariah Delaney's Author-of-the-Month Club*, 1990, by Sheila Greenwald).

Any teacher who has planned or participated in an author's visit, or is thinking about doing so, should read Daniel Manus Pinkwater's picture book, *Author's Day* (1993). Pinkwater shows the visitation tongue-in-cheek, from the author's perspective. Teachers should easily be able to identify faculty, staff, students, and circumstances similar to those they know. It may not be flattering, but it is a humorous story. This is what happens when author Bramwell Wink-Porter is taken to the gym to talk with the second and third grades:

> *The second and third graders had prepared questions to ask the famous author.*
>
> *"Was it hard to write* The Fuzzy Bunny?*" they asked him.*
>
> *"No, it was not very hard...I suppose," Bramwell Wink-Porter said.*
>
> *"What is your favorite book?" another child asked.*
>
> *"My favorite book is* Moby Dick *by Herman Melville," Bramwell Wink-Porter answered.*
>
> *"No — I mean your favorite book that you wrote."*
>
> *"Oh. Well, I'd have to say* The Bunny Brothers,*" Bramwell Wink-Porter said.*
>
> *The second and third graders looked at each other.*
>
> *"You haven't read that one, have you?" Bramwell Wink-Porter said. "Well, I hope you will."*
>
> *"What is your favorite rodent?"*
>
> *"That's easy — a bunny," said Bramwell Wink-Porter.*
>
> *"A bunny isn't properly a rodent. Bunnies belong to the order of Lagomorpha."*
>
> *"In that case, I'd say gerbils are my favorite rodents. Gerbils are rodents, aren't they?"*
>
> *"What is your favorite ladies' shoe?"*
>
> *"A light green high-heeled sandal, size eight."*
>
> *"What is your own shoe size?"*
>
> *"Ten."*
>
> *"Do you have a favorite kind of toast?"*
>
> *"Yes, raisin."*
>
> *"What is the greatest number of hot dogs you have eaten at one sitting?"*
>
> *"Eleven."*
>
> *"Have you ever been to South America?"*
>
> *"No."*
>
> *"Would you like to go there?"*
>
> *"Yes."*
>
> *"Which is better, grape soda or ginger ale?"*
>
> *"Grape soda."*
>
> *"Have you ever been bitten by a horse?"*
>
> *"Yes."*
>
> *"That's all the time we have, children," Mrs. Feenbogen said. "Let's give Mr. Bramwell Wink-Porter a big hand."*

Books today even provide students with settings and characters that combine to point out how writing can be improved. There are many nonfiction books that directly address children and their writing skills and abilities, but not as many that in story form show how an author works through putting a book together. Two new titles, *What do Authors Do?* (1995) by Eileen Christelow and *From Pictures to Words* (1995) by Janet Stevens follow two popular picture book authors as they think of an idea, prepare text and illustrations, revise and edit, and finally go to press. Both books have a wealth of information which is presented fictionally. As *From Pictures to Words* begins, Janet Stevens is pictured in sepia tones while surrounding her are such colorful characters as a buffalo in cowboy boots, a tabby cat wearing a parka and tasseled winter hat, a panda in ice skates, a walrus wearing a vivid Hawaiian shirt, a rhino in a blue pin-striped suit with red tie, and a koala in a teal chenille bathrobe wearing pink bunny slippers. Janet explains: "...I am an illustrator. Drawing pictures for books is my job. Authors write the words, then I do the artwork."

This obviously doesn't satisfy the others. They quickly interject, "We're the characters in your imagination talking. We think it's about time you wrote a story for us."

Janet protests, "I draw pictures. I can't write stories!"

But the characters are insistent and say,

> *You can if you try! Come on, we're all dressed up with no place to go. We need to be in a book. We want something exciting to do. We need places to go, people to meet. We're like actors without a stage, burgers without buns, aliens without spaceships.*

And with an appeal like that, what else can Janet do but give it a try? These characters support, collaborate, suggest, and sometimes bicker as they help Janet through the creative process of writing, illustrating, and publishing a book.

Although the story is not actually written within the text, it is only suggested by the sketches and props shown in the illustrations, Kate Duke's *Aunt Isabel Tells a Good One* (1992) guides the reader through all the plot elements needed to keep an audience entertained and involved. Like most children little Penelope has a simple request.

> *"Tell me a story," said Penelope one night after supper.*
>
> *"What kind of story?" asked Aunt Isabel.*
>
> *"A good story," said Penelope.*
>
> *"All right," said Aunt Isabel. "A good story is the hardest kind to tell, though. We must put it together carefully, with just the right ingredients. Let's start by giving it a When and a Where. When does the story begin?"*
>
> *"Long, long ago," said Penelope.*
>
> *"And where does it begin?" asked Aunt Isabel.*
>
> *"Think of a place where exciting things can happen."*

With Aunt Isabel's prompting Penelope adds a prince and a princess, handsome, talented and charming; romance; a problem; villains, odious, nasty and bad; a little danger; a daring and ingenious rescue; and naturally a happy ending.

There are even a limited number of books that describe the editing process. This passage comes from *Write on, Rosy!*

> *In Writing Workshop I took my official Dr. Gormly story to the editing table. At the editing table were red and blue pencils. I marked the words I thought were spelled wrong and the punctuation I wasn't sure about. Then I changed some paragraphs around so they sounded better. I thought up some new words that had more impact. I used the circle-and-expand strategy, circling sentences where I needed more information; and the circle-and-delete strategy, circling what seemed unnecessary.*

Rosy obviously understands editing very well.

Although today's authors present children who write more frequently, there is still one aspect of writing that is not often included. Writers seldom explain or show how someone gets the initial idea that finally becomes a written piece. Some non-fiction books directed at beginning writers are filled with prompts, recipes, tips, and general guidelines to encourage thinking, observing, and hopefully writing. But even with all these formulas, the nonfiction books don't explain how that wisp of an idea, that fragment of a thought gets translated to pencil and paper and put down for others to read.

Some books do hint at the difficulties that await writers, both novice and accomplished. For one thing, writing is hard work. As Charlotte describes in *Shakespeare and Annie the Great* (1989) by Barbara Ware Holmes, "To them (her father and the school librarian), it might sound easy to write a work of art, but it wasn't. So far, it was the hardest thing she'd ever done, and she hadn't even done it yet."

For another, it's easy for a writer to get distracted. This obviously happens to Richard, in *Lazy Lions, Lucky Lambs* (1989) by Patricia Reilly Giff:

> *He thought about spiders. He wished he could write a story about them. Real ones. Giant size. He'd call his story 'Richard the Spider Boy.' This time Holly would be afraid. She'd be standing on top of the couch. She'd beg him to get rid of the spiders. He'd wait until they had crawled all over the place. Then he'd lasso them. They'd fall on the floor. They'd break into a zillion pieces. Just the way the blue statue had. Suddenly he remembered loose-leaf. He should have gotten some at the candy store. He thought about going back. It was too much trouble.*

But when a writer finally "gets" just the right idea, then the writing begins to happen, as it does with Anastasia in *Anastasia Krupnick* (1984) by Lois Lowry:

> *Anastasia was listening to the words that were appearing in her own head, floating there and arranging themselves into groups, into lines, into poems. There were so many poems being born in her head that she ran all the way home from school to find a private place to write them down, the way her cat had once found a private place — the pile of ironing in the pantry — in which to create kittens.*

There will always be children for whom writing comes naturally and easily, while others will struggle to put together a sentence. But at least for now, when a child needs to bring to mind a writer and what that person does, examples can be found in children's literature. Little Rosa, who struggled to write her name on a library card, now has a place in a literary world with other child characters who write.

Bibliography for Children as Writers in Literature

Arnold, Tedd. (1992). *The signmaker's assistant.* New York: Dial.

The signmaker's young apprentice, Norman, longs to be in charge, but creates problems throughout the town when he has a chance to run the shop. Grades K-2.

Bedard, Michael. (1992). *Emily.* New York: Doubleday.

When a mother and child pay a visit to their reclusive neighbor Emily, who stays in her house writing poems, there is an exchange of special gifts. An unusual portrait of a famous poet and her writing habits. A picture book that can be used with older students when showing how writers get their ideas. Grades 1-5.

Blos, Joan W. (1979). *A gathering of days: A New England girl's journal, 1830-1832.* New York: Scribner.

The journal of a fourteen-year-old girl as she lives on a New Hampshire farm. She records the daily events, her father's remarriage, and the death of her best friend. Although a Newbery Medal Award book, the plot is not especially moving. Grades 4-6.

Boulton, Jane. (1994). *Only Opal: The diary of a young girl.* New York: Putnam & Grosset.

An adaptation of the diary of six-year-old Opal Whiteley, in which she describes her life in an Oregon lumber camp in the early 1900s. Although the text has been adapted, Opal's longing to have more free time to view nature and record her thoughts is clearly presented. The words and phrasing seem typical of a young child. Grades 1-3.

Brown, Marc. (1991). *Arthur meets the President.* Boston: Joy Street Books.

Arthur's essay wins a contest and he has to read it to the President in a special ceremony at the White House. Any "Arthur" book has a ready-made audi-

ence. Although more emphasis is placed on Arthur's delivery of the essay, rather than his composition of it, it does show that writing has a purpose. Grades K-2.

Byars, Betsy. (1988). *Beans on the roof*. New York: Delacorte.

Each member of the Bean family is inspired by going to the roof of their apartment building to write a poem. Grades 2-4.

Byars, Betsy. (1989). *Bingo Brown and the language of love*. New York: Viking.

Bingo tries to sustain a long-distance romance with Melissa while fending off Cici. He also copes with the impending arrival of a newborn sibling while gracefully navigating puberty. Bingo's letters to Melissa are interspersed with the chapters. Grades 5-7.

Byars, Betsy. (1990). *Bingo Brown, gypsy lover*. New York: Viking.

As his parents regress into childhood, Bingo Brown prepares for the biggest responsibility of his young life — being a big brother. Between the chapters Bingo writes letters of advice to his not-yet-born brother. Grades 5-7.

Byars, Betsy. (1992). *Bingo Brown's guide to romance*. New York: Viking.

Bingo Brown's work on his definitive "Guide to Romance" hits a snag when his long-distance girlfriend Melissa returns unexpectedly from Oklahoma. Bingo's entries in his romance guide vary from assured man-of-world, naive seventh grader, and hopeful romantic. Grades 5-7.

Byars, Betsy. (1988). *The burning question of Bingo Brown*. New York: Viking.

Bingo Brown reflects on the unanswerable questions of life — the confusing problems of youth, romance, growing up, and insights into adult conflicts — in his English class journal. Grades 5-7.

Byars, Betsy. (1982). *The two-thousand pound goldfish*. New York: Harper & Row.

Warren creates horror movie scripts to compensate for his longing for the love of his long-absent mother. Portions of his many scripts, one of which features a goldfish grown immense in the sewer system, are throughout the book. Grades 4-6.

Caseley, Judith. (1991). *Dear Annie*. New York: Greenwillow.

Presents a series of postcards and letters Annie sends to or receives from her loving grandfather from the time she is born. Grades K-2.

Christelow, Eileen. (1995). *What do author's do?* New York: Clarion.

Twelve-year-old Anastasia is not happy with her parents' decision to move to a new home in the suburbs. Throughout the novel Anastasia writes a five chapter novel. Grades 4 -6.

Cleary, Beverly. (1983). *Dear Mr. Henshaw*. New York: Morrow.

Leigh Botts writes letters to his favorite author asking for information and describing his own life since his parents got divorced. A Newberry Medal Award book. Grades 4-6.

Cleary, Beverly. *Strider*. (1991). New York: Morrow.

In a series of diary entries, Leigh tells how he comes to terms with his parents' divorce, acquires joint custody of an abandoned dog, and joins the track team at school. A sequel to the Newbery Award-winning book *Dear Mr. Henshaw*. Grades 5-7.

Conford, Ellen. (1989). *Jenny Archer, author*. Boston: Little Brown.

Jenny has trouble writing her autobiography and invents a fantastic tale which her classmates and teacher find difficult to believe. Grades 2-4.

Cushman, Karen. *Catherine, called Birdy*. (1994). New York: Clarion.

Birdy, the thirteen-year-old daughter of an English country knight, keeps a journal in which she records the events of her life, particularly her longing for adventures beyond the usual role of women and her efforts to avoid being married off. Although the language and events of the book set it in the Middle Ages, Birdy's feelings and emotions are universal to any era. Grades 6-8.

Duke, Kate. (1992). *Aunt Isabel tells a good one*. New York: Dutton.

Little Penelope, with the help of her Aunt Isabel, makes up an exciting story about the adventures of a brave and daring princess and a handsome prince. Grades K-2.

Felt, Sue. (1950). *Rosa-too-little.* New York: Doubleday.

Rosa enjoys visiting the library during story hour but longs to sign out books on her own. After practicing throughout the summer, she is able to sign her name and receive her own library card. Grades K-2.

Giff, Patricia Reilly. (1985). *Lazy lions, lucky lambs.* New York: Dell.

Richard "Beast" Best, who absolutely hates the month of March, must come up with a subject for a class essay assignment about a real person because, without a good grade, he may be left back again. Richard's steps, in selecting a subject and then preparing his report, are a great guide to any beginning writer. Grades 2-4.

Giff, Patricia Reilly. (1991). *The war began at supper: Letters to Miss Loria.* New York: Delacorte.

The children in Mrs. Clark's second grade class write letters to their former student teacher, Miss Loria, about events at school mixed with comments on the Persian Gulf Crisis. The letters vary in their reactions to the Gulf crisis. Some seem typical of a second grader, while others show an adult maturity and outlook. Grades 3-5.

Greenwald, Sheila. (1990). *Mariah Delany's Author-of the Month Club.* Boston: Little Brown.

Mariah invites authors to speak at her Author-of-the-Month Club with near disastrous results. When the club members begin to take a turn as the Authors-of-the-Month, the club becomes a success.
Grades 4-6.

Greenwald, Sheila. (1988). *Write on, Rosy!* Boston, MA, Joy Street Books.

Having decided she might like a career as a writer, Rosy Cole chooses to write about her headmistress for the school's Young Author's Program, and the result is both revealing and disastrous. Rosie's tactics for gathering her information and reporting her findings imitate the tabloid magazines, rather than serious journalists. A light hearted and humorous story. Grades 3-5.

Heide, Florence Parry. (1990). *The day of Ahmed's secret.* New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard.

Cairo holds a new appeal for Ahmed, a butagaz boy who makes deliveries throughout the city. Ahmed is being tutored in learning to read and write. Grades K-2.

Holmes, Barbara Ware. (1989). *Charlotte Shakespeare and Annie the Great.* New York: Harper & Row.

Charlotte writes a play for the sixth grade and helps her friend, Annie, audition and become the lead in the play. Grades 4-6.

Hunt, Irene. (1966). *Up a road slowly.* Chicago: Follett.

Julie goes to live with Aunt Cordelia in the country. Auntie is exact about everything, but after some adjustments, Julie elects to remain with Aunt Cordelia when her father remarries. Through the years Aunt Cordelia encourages Julie's interest in becoming a writer. Grades 4-6.

James, Simon. (1991). *Dear Mr. Blueberry.* New York: Macmillan/Maxwell.

A young girl and her teacher correspond about the creature she has discovered in her pond. Through the series of letters, the reader, along with the girl and her teacher, Mr. Blueberry, gradually begin to realize the creature is a whale. Grades K-2.

Kessler, Leonard. (1961). *Mr. Pine's mixed-up signs.* New York: Grosset & Dunlap.

When Mr. Pine misplaces his glasses, the signs he makes are placed at unusual locations causing havoc in town. Finally Mr. Pine finds his glasses and straightens out the problems. Grades K-1.

Kline, Suzy. (1993). *Mary Maroney hides out.* New York: Putnam.

Mary, a second grader, is so embarrassed about her stuttering that she almost misses a chance to have lunch with her favorite author. Mary's speech disorder is portrayed realistically. The author's sympathetic reaction to Mary and her suggestions about Mary's writing, make any reader long for an author's visit. Grades 1-3.

Lasky, Kathryn. (1988). *Sea swan.* New York: Macmillan.

On her seventy-fifth birthday, Elzibah Swan decides she will learn to swim, and her new activity inspires her to develop other skills and gain self respect and independence. As she does, she recounts her accomplishments in letters to her two grandchildren. Grades 1-3.

Lowry, Lois. (1981). *Anastasia again!* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Twelve-year-old Anastasia is not happy about her parents' decision to move to a new home in the suburbs. Throughout the novel Anastasia writes a five chapter novel. Grades 4-6.

Lowry, Lois. (1984). *Anastasia, ask your analyst*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Anastasia Krupnik sets out to psychoanalyze herself as she attempts to cope with the problems of growing up, conflict with her mother, trouble with her little brother Sam, and the pressures of becoming thirteen. Anastasia's diary entries separating the chapters reveal her attempts to copy Freud and Jung. Grades 5-7.

Lowry, Lois. (1991). *Anastasia at this address*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Anastasia, through correspondence with a number in a personal ad, presents herself as much older and mature. This becomes a problem when Anastasia agrees to meet her pen pal in person. Grades 5 -7.

Lowry, Lois. (1986). *Anastasia has the answers*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Thirteen-year-old Anastasia sets out to pursue her goal of becoming a journalist by probing for the reasons behind Daphne Bellingham's parents' divorce; while, at the same time, trying to cope with her lack of coordination in gym class. Anastasia records her thoughts, feelings, and reactions in her diary. Grades 5-7.

Lowry, Lois. (1991). *Anastasia Krupnik*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Anastasia's tenth year is filled with some wonderful happenings, like falling in love and really getting to know her grandmother; but other things, including a name that is too long and a new baby brother are awful. Anastasia's diary entries are interspersed between the chapters of narration. Grades 5-7.

Lowry, Lois. (1985). *Anastasia on her own*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

In her mother's absence, resourceful Anastasia has to cope with her brother Sam's chicken pox, an unexpected visit from her father's old girlfriend, and her own first date. To run the household successfully, Anastasia writes lists of things to accomplish. Unfortunately things usually don't go as planned. Grades 5-7.

Lowry, Lois. (1987). *Anastasia's chosen career*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

While exploring a wide range of possible career opportunities and directions, thirteen-year-old Anastasia Krupnik decides to enhance her poise and charm by attending a modeling school. Interspersed with the chapters, Anastasia includes a self-written press release about her future in a variety of careers. Grades 5-7.

Lowry, Lois. (1992). *Attaboy, Sam!* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Sam is able to help his sister Anastasia with the poem she is writing for their mother's birthday, but his own efforts to create a special perfume are disastrous. Sam's contributions to the poetic process are given equal value as that of his older sister, Anastasia. Sam also explains how he learned to read. Grades 5-7.

Nixon, Joan Lowery. (1988). *If you were a writer*. New York: Four Winds.

In an introduction to the craft of creative writing, Mother helps Melia search for ideas, discover descriptive vocabulary, and develop characters and plots in order for Melia to express herself through her stories. An excellent presentation in a picture book format aimed at a young audience. Grades 1-2.

Perl, Lila. (1987). *The secret diary of Katie Dickerhoff*. New York: Scholastic.

Fourteen-year-old Katie lies while writing her diary, writing what she wishes would happen, rather than what did. As a result, she learns how to make wishful thinking a reality. Examples of her diary pages begin each chapter. Grades 4-6.

Pfeffer, Susan Beth. (1989). *Dear dad, love Laurie*. New York: Scholastic.

Laurie's letters to her divorced father follow her year in sixth grade and her efforts to enter her school's program for the gifted and talented. The novel is told entirely through Laurie's letters. Grades 4-6.

Pinkney, Andrea Davis. (1994). *Dear Benjamin Banneker*. New York: Hardcourt Brace.

An accomplished astronomer and mathematician, African American Benjamin Banneker decided to take a stand against slavery. His correspondence with Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson explains his position. Presented in a picture book format, the text explains portions of Banneker's original letters. Grades 1-4.

Pinkwater, Daniel Manus. (1993). *Author's day*. New York: Macmillan/Maxwell.

A famous children's author visits an elementary school and the description of his day is the perfect example of what shouldn't occur. A very humorous book, especially from a teacher's viewpoint. All grades.

Robertson, Keith. (1958). *Henry Read, Inc*. New York: Viking.

Henry and his friend Midge, go into the "research business" during summer vacation. The results of their enterprises are recorded in Henry's journal. Unfortunately, the journal entries are presented as a narrative and do not appear in the first person voice. Grades 4 -6.

Snyder, Carol. (1983). *Memo: To myself when I have a teenage kid*. New York: Coward-McCann.

Reading the diary her mother wrote when she was thirteen helps Karen gain a better understanding of her mother and herself. Grades 4-6.

Stevens, Janet. (1995). *From pictures to words: A book about making a book*. New York: Holiday House.

Janet Stevens, with the help of Koala Bear, Cat, and Rhino from her imagination, describes how she writes and illustrates a picture book. Grades K-2.

Tolan, Stephanie. (1993). *Save Halloween!* New York: Morrow.

Eleven-year-old Johnna, who is involved in writing the sixth grade Halloween pageant, faces conflict with her family who views the time as a un-Christian holiday. Grades 6-8.

VanLeeuwen, Jean. (1989). *Dear Mom, you're ruining my life*. New York: Dial.

A good-natured but overenthusiastic mother is just one of the problems eleven-year-old Samantha records in her diary. Grades 4 -6.

Williams, Barbara. (1990). *The author and Squinty Gritt*. New York: Dutton.

When a famous children's author visits Squinty's school and offers a special prize, Squinty puts his imagination to work. He wins; and, as he lunches with the author, learns she will incorporate his name in a future book. Grades 2-4.

Williams, Vera. (1987). *Stringbean's trip to the shining sea*. New York: Greenwillow.

Stringbean describes his trip to the West Coast in a series of postcards. Every aspect of the postcard, from its illustration to the postmark relate to the text. Stringbean visits most of the U.S. states as he travels west. Grades 1-4.

Woodruff, Elvira. (1992). *Dear Napoleon, I know you're dead, but*.... New York: Holiday House.
Marty receives a surprising reply when he writes a letter describing his spirited but sick grandfather to Napoleon Bonaparte as a school assignment. Throughout the novel, Marty continues to receive replies to his letters to other historical figures. At the end, Marty and the reader are left with a sense of mystery about who replied. Grades 5-7.

Illustration on page 27 by Louis Jambor from *Little Women* (1947 edition).

Illustration on page 30 by Irene Haas from *Dear Dragon* (1962).

Illustration on page 33 by Sue Felt from *Rosa Too Little* (1950).

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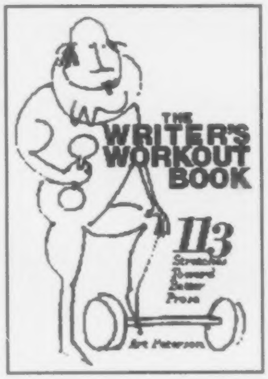

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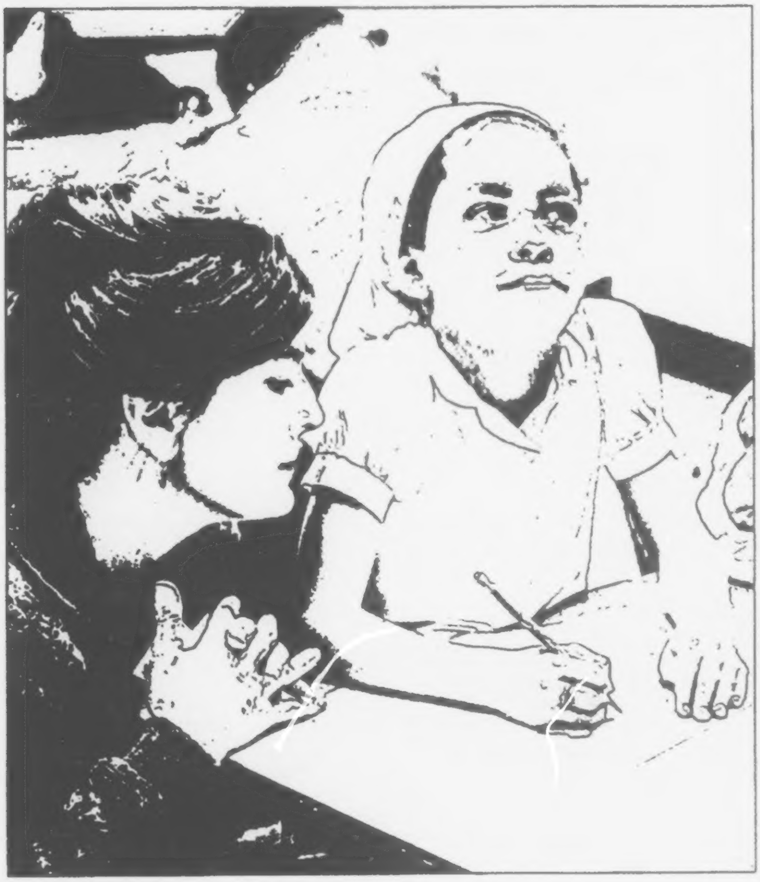

Write What You Know: A New Look

(See Page 17)

CONTENTS

VIEWPOINT

The Seven-Year Itch: Politics and Literacy 1
LUCÍA VILLARREAL

WRITERS OUT OF THE MAINSTREAM

We Are No Stephen Kings: The Reluctant Road from Coal Miner to Classroom 5
AIDA MAINELLA EVERHART

"Otherness" and Other Imponderables: Teaching Hmong Students Academic Writing 10
MARK BALHORN AND LAURIE MEYER

WRITERS FIND A VOICE

You Know More than You Think you Do: A New Look at "Write What You Know" 17
MARK FARRINGTON

Getting Real: Authenticity in Writing Prompts 20
PATRICIA A. SLAGLE

WRITERS ONLINE

Book Review: Link/Age: Composing in the Online Classroom 24
REVIEWED BY PAUL MOLINELLI

Surfing the 'Net: A Writing Workshop for Middle School 29
JEAN BOREEN

Photographs by
ELIZABETH CREWS

The Quarterly
OF THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT

SUMMER 1997 Volume 19, Number 3

The Seven Year Itch:

Politics and Literacy

by

LUCÍA VILLARREAL

◆

For me, teaching is a rewarding, creative challenge. However, it is also a difficult profession. Outside forces, overly invested in philosophical, pedagogical, and political battles, pose some of these difficulties. These forces cause upheaval in the professional community and unsettling changes in the classroom.

The most unsettling of institutional upheavals is the textbook/curriculum adoption cycle. By the time students graduate from high school, legislators have often put them through three different curricula in each subject.

These textbook adoption cycles are supposed to promote improvement in instruction and materials and reflect the best of recent research findings. Professionals, particularly in literacy education, need to keep pace with cutting edge research. Their research sheds more light on literacy learning, which in turn must be incorporated into theory and practice. Yet the curriculum adoption process more often reflects the prevailing political climate and victories in intensely-lobbied publisher wars than breakthroughs in learning theory and practice.

To some extent, the corporate propensity for built-in obsolescence, the need to create never-ending consumption, is at play. As a late-model literacy solution comes into vogue, the last rage fades. But classrooms aren't fashions. We need to create consistent, effective opportunities for academic growth. This year we in California are experiencing yet another literacy adoption rife with political and economic considerations that have little to do with effective teaching.

Patricia Cunningham, in *Classrooms That Work*, says, "The question of how best to teach children to read and write is one which has been argued, debated, and researched for decades. It is a question to which there is not a definite answer" (p. 13). The lack of clear answers invites important conversations about literacy education. The debate, however, concentrates in two extreme camps, each claiming to have the definitive solution.

Over the past decade, my students and I have become casualties in the war between the pedagogical camps of whole-focused and parts-focused literacy education. We have suffered as the literacy pendulum swings from "literature-based" to "basic skills," from "whole language" to "phonics first." As we endure the current swing to basic skills and phonics, we are again being asked to break our instructional mirrors and endure seven years of bad luck. We are asked to embrace another new reading program while being shamed and blamed for following what, seven years ago, was state of the art.

In my twenty-four years of teaching, I have experienced four of these schizophrenic swings in literacy adoptions. When I started teaching in 1973, teachers were using skills-based reading programs like *Distar*, with workbooks and spellers as the mainstay of reading instruction. At that time, first graders did very little writing. They mostly copied words or key sentences from the board. Group stories were written, with the children dictating and the teacher writing on a chart from which the children would then copy the story for themselves. Second graders began to write on their own, but this was usually limited to sentences using their spelling words. Not until third grade did they attempt to write their own stories, and even then, writing was not viewed as a process; the focus was always on the product.

Two years later, when I was barely getting the hang of Distar, literature-based programs such as Bill Martins' *The Sounds of Language* became the base for literacy teaching. Spellers and workbooks were still supplied, and I knew enough to keep skills in my lessons, although I did welcome the wonderful literature. During this time, the revolutionary idea of writing as a process was promoted by the Bay Area Writing Project in Berkeley. At my school we began to try to understand and teach writing this way, but we lacked good training. I remember not knowing how to teach the skills within the process. We tried to encourage fluency and children were writing more, but writing conventions were not very evident. I wondered if we were doomed to have one or the other, but not both.

In 1982 the back-to-basics hysteria hit, and we were told to throw out the literature, replacing it with SRA kits and basal text programs, again with workbooks and spellers. Like many other teachers, I refused to throw out my literature books, keeping them to integrate with the new materials. We were tired of the swings in teaching fashions where the political yaysayers of yesterday became the naysayers of today. Also, the students and I enjoyed the literature books that were deemed outmoded.

In my twenty-four years of teaching, I have experienced four … schizophrenic swings in literacy adoptions.

In 1987 I attended my first Central Coast Writing Project Summer Institute at UC Santa Cruz, and I better understood the writing process as I myself became a writer. I understood firsthand that both process and product are important, that it is the development of ideas and fluency, the process of response, revision, editing, and publishing which all contribute to a polished product. This new understanding allowed me to construct my own pedagogy, becoming a more effective teacher of writing. I wanted, but did not yet have, this same understanding and effectiveness as a teacher of reading.

The seven-year cycle hit again in 1989 with the swing back to literature-based reading instruction and "Whole Language." At last, it seemed to be a time when process in both reading and writing was going to be the focus, with a conscientious treatment of skills within the context of literacy events. Whole language is a literature-based, meaning-centered approach to literacy instruction. Although it centers on working with the whole text for meaning, enjoyment, response, interpretation and extension, it also includes working with appropriate parts of the text, as children's needs dictate, in order to move them towards independence and fluency in reading and writing. Unfortunately, the extremists of the whole language movement insisted that we adopt only literature books, seemingly certain that skills would be learned indirectly from exposure to the literature.

Rather than a true whole language methodology, the pendulum swing drove us to adopt a narrower, more limited version. A wholesale dumping of basals, workbooks, spellers and skills-related materials ensued. We received no training to integrate the teaching of skills within the teaching of literature. Again, we seemed doomed to have one or the other, but not both.

What are we leaving behind each time we abruptly change the materials, the curricula, and the pedagogy of literacy education? When we ostensibly throw out all methods and materials every seven years, we are in essence trying to wipe the slate clean. Are we to leave nothing of our prior knowledge to build on? Once an adoption occurs, teachers are herded like cattle into training rooms to be told how to use the new materials, a practice which in itself creates the beginning of failure. If the new curriculum represents paradigm shifts in literacy education, then teachers need a thorough understanding of the theory behind labels like "whole language." In her article, "When Teachers Use Literature for Literacy Instruction," Glennellen Pace states, "When a teacher undertakes activities in the absence of a coherent theory of language and learning, inconsistencies and contradictions in children's literacy experiences often appear" (p. 13). These inconsistencies and contradictions, these holes in a teacher's understanding, create confusion for both teachers and students.

Don Holdaway saw this too, and warned us more than eighteen years ago in his book, *The Foundations of Literacy*, that "Each major method has been successful for about the same proportion of children, while at the same time producing its own crop of failures. In almost every conflict of reading method it would be true to say that both sides had been right in insisting that their insights were crucial, but both sides had been abysmally wrong in insisting that the insights of the other side were totally wrong" (p. 25). Furthermore, Patricia Cunningham tells us, "The question to be asked is not 'which approach?' but rather, 'How can we have classrooms so that we have it all?' The reason the great debate rages on is that there is truth in all the arguments" (Cunningham, p. 15).

Why don't we learn? Why do we allow the extremists to take us from one side to the other? Why can't we accept that all learning requires a knowledge and utility of parts within meaningful wholes? The cognitive research of Marie Clay, Constance Weaver, Frank Smith and others shows that, to create meaning, our brains both take in parts and integrate those into wholes, and take in wholes and break those into parts. The literacy student who can draw on both of these processes is the most successful. Therefore, the teacher who can incorporate both, as the students' needs dictate, within a meaning-centered approach will assure that students have all the tools necessary for independent, fluent literacy.

But there is a price to pay for the teachers who try to avoid the extremes. At each swing of the pendulum, there are staff divisions, teacher self-doubts, and an ensuing silence. As I have stayed on the sidelines of the extremist debate, trying to garner enough philosophy and methodology to support my instruction, my sense of isolation has intensified. I have been a refugee from the pedagogy wars.

Nevertheless, in the past few years, many teachers have attempted to take back our classrooms by encouraging a balanced, consistent and sustainable approach to literacy teaching. I think that we, as professionals, need to dig in our heels and no longer allow outside forces, driven by pride, politics, or publishers, to jerk us around every seven years.

However, so that we do not become calcified, teachers need to follow Don Holdaway's advice by becoming "... those who are determined to try out ideas for themselves, to think deeply and to be convinced slowly; those who are prepared to read more widely when in doubt; and those who wish to influence outcomes from an informed conviction which they have tested in their own experience" (Holdaway, p. 11). It is important to keep pace with research and to modify our teaching, honing our practice based on both our professional experience and on new "cutting edge" ideas and programs. But rather than allowing the teaching profession to be coerced into arbitrary changes every seven years, we need to cultivate professional dialogue and reflection. We need to keep the best methods and still question them, so that we can grow.

Although I have tried to stay away from the battles of whole vs. parts, I have not abandoned the attempt to find out what it is that students need in order to become independent readers and writers. I have continued to read the literature on emergent literacy, to engage in professional conversation, and, since 1989, to conduct teacher research.

Teachers constantly do research in their classrooms. Most is done on an informal basis, as we plan, design, and implement materials and activities, monitor our teaching and assess and document our students' progress, and then reevaluate our units of study for possible future use. This process inevitably leaves us with questions, and we form hypotheses about the learning and the materials which affect our choices for the next lesson. We then move naturally from this informal research method into a conscious process of documentation to better inform our teaching.

The research, the writing down of what we see and think and wonder in the classroom, stimulates deep thinking, reflection, and clarification. It is the children, always the children, who can guide us as they show us what works and does not work for them. Their successes must always be our compass, for "Learning to read and write ought to be one of the most joyful and successful of human undertakings" (Ibid., p. 1). Therefore, this joy and success must be what motivates us to keep or change literacy methods and materials.

In the past two years, the wonderful literacy successes in my classroom have given me the professional self-confidence which I yearned for but which eluded me for two decades. My literacy program has gone from a literature-based, "combination" approach, built from scattered pieces of what has worked over the years, to a much more well thought-out "comprehensive literature- and strategies-based program." We use literature and "leveled books" to model, share, and guide the reading and writing process while learning specific cueing systems and strategies which support independence and fluency. Students learn to self-monitor their literacy process and progress, building metacognitive abilities that give them ownership of their learning.

Last year, for the first time in twenty-four years, all of my first-graders went on to second grade as independent readers and writers. I owe this success not to a newer, better, faster literacy model, but rather to my teacher-research which has led me, through the children, to the professional literacy resources which have been out there all along. It is my questions, my observations, my students—my research—which has allowed me to discern which in-services and other professional opportunities to pursue, what to change, what to keep, and where to go next. My research and the children have taught me that the best learner/teacher is the one who can self-monitor and be open to the next step in that learning/teaching process. It is this self-monitoring that has become the focus of my inquiry, and it is this inquiry, rather than the seven-year itch of textbook adoption, which guides my teaching.

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We Are No Stephen Kings:

The Reluctant Road from Coal Mine to Classroom

by

AIDA MAINELLA EVERHART

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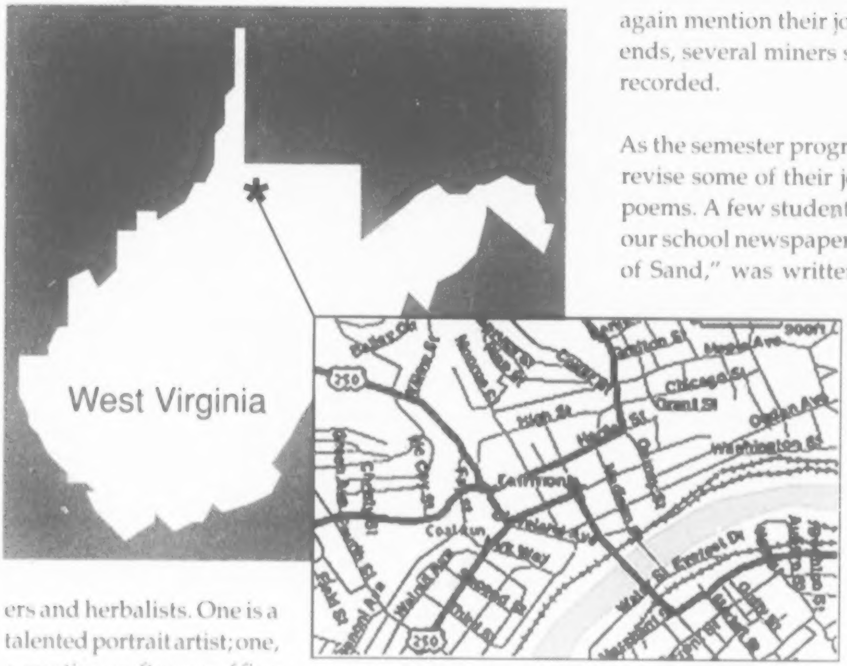
In November, 1995, the Martinka Coal Company in Fairmont, West Virginia, closed down its operation, shutting down the lives of 350 men and women. Many had worked twenty-five or more years at that mine. Ironically, at a previous United Mine Workers meeting, the officials of Martinka assured all of their employees, union and company, that Martinka had hundreds of miles of unmined coal and that they could almost guarantee each miner at least eighteen more years of employment. Within a month and with no forewarning, Martinka closed, leaving millions of dollars worth of machinery, copper and tools entombed within the mine. Within weeks in Morgantown, not more than fifteen miles north, Arkwright Mine closed its entire mining operation, furloughing over 350 more coal miners.

It is February, 1996, and sitting before me are approximately thirty-five middle-aged ex-coal miners who haven't attended school in probably thirty-odd years. My basic education course, formally called a "Transition Class," is designed to help the miners move from the familiar world of the mines into an academic environment where they will be trained for new work. Within this "transition" classroom, I teach refresher courses in a variety of academic subjects including math and language arts. I also cover job search skills, including resume writing and interviewing techniques, as well as psychological topics such as self-esteem and coping with a job loss. Another teacher of technology is hired to teach computer literacy.

My students' academic histories are widely disparate. Three members of my class are barely literate; ten are avid readers, reading at a high-school level; several read on a third- to fifth-grade level; six have accumulated college or university credits; and four are forty-ish college graduates who, at the time of graduation, opted to work in the (then flourishing) coal mining industry. My average client is forty-six years old, predominately white and male, but I also teach two females, four blacks, one Lithuanian who speaks English as his second language, one who speaks German as a second language, and six students who are pushing sixty. More than two dozen have served in the Armed Services, many in Vietnam. More than fifty percent are divorced; ten have admitted to having a drug and/or alcohol abuse problem, and approximately seven have undergone a twelve-step rehabilitation program.

The coal miners have an equally wide range of exceptional talents and skills. I teach top-notch mechanics and semi-professional musicians (three lead singers, two who have recorded, one who writes music, arranges and directs, and two who are experienced recording engineers). Four are gourmet cooks; several are master electricians, landscape technicians, carpenters, plumbers, home builders. One young father supplements his meager income by restoring and detailing classic cars. Two miners are experts in telecommunications, and several possess solid sales and marketing experience. Two are avid organic garden-



ers and herbalists. One is a talented portrait artist; one, a creative craftsman of fine wooden patio furniture. At least a half-dozen miners own and maintain West Virginia farmland of 50 or more acres, plowing gardens to make an extra buck. One is a professional boxer. But despite all these differences, the miners share several important traits. Each and every one of these displaced miners possesses a deep-rooted work ethic; all are dependable and trustworthy; and all want nothing more than to reenter the work force in order to support themselves and their families. And none has ever written a creative piece of literature in their lives — until now.

On this first day of class, after our introductions, I begin to outline some of the activities I have planned for this class. When I mention keeping a journal, the miners go berserk. A few become belligerent. "How will this help me get a job?" "I'm not planning on becoming a Steven King," "I can't write a damn thing." I explain that I do not intend to read nor will I attempt to correct, God forbid, their journals. They finally agree, after some pretty heated discussion, that keeping a journal would not only be good therapy, but that keeping a journal would allow them to record a little piece of their very own autobiographies for their children and their children's children. Journalizing these traumatic times would allow them to put down in words instead of merely thinking angry thoughts about how coal mining has affected and continues to affect their lives and those of their families. I never again mention their journals, but before the semester ends, several miners share some of the ideas they've recorded.

As the semester progresses, the ex-miners revisit and revise some of their journal entries into articles and poems. A few students offer pieces for publication in our school newspaper. The following piece, "A Grain of Sand," was written by a 54-year-old miner who knew no other job his entire adult life than mining coal deep within the bituminous bowels of the North Central West Virginia coal fields:

A Grain of Sand

Upon hearing that I lost my job, I was devastated.
I couldn't believe what I was hearing.
Then I realized I was nothing to the company,
The company I devoted over 22 years of my life to.
We, the miners, were just a grain of sand
For them to walk on
To crunch into the ground and
To bury. (K.S.)

Another miner's journal entry is transformed into the story they all share, a story of broken promises and uncertain futures:

Get Over It and Survive

...Our mine foreman has just told us we had eighteen more years of work and most of us were set for life. AT 10:00 A.M. the following Monday morning we were told the mine would be closed in thirty days. I was not mad because the company closed the mine, but I was furious because they lied to everyone about our futures, breaking their promise of 18 more years of work. I felt that the company and the world owed me and my family 18 years of work. But with the training I am now getting, I hope I never have to go into the coal mines again. Yes, I was mad, hurt, upset and depressed but now I have to get over it and survive. (S.V.)

The final line of this miner's bitter poem reveals the fear they all face:

I want a job as a butler
free uniforms
free limo

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free food
free drugs
free booze
minimum wage (O.T.)

On one occasion I ask the class to jot down in their journals words, phrases, anything that may convey a thought, idea, opinion regarding the changes that have so abruptly taken place in their lives due to the mine closings. Two follow:

change in my lifestyle:
face losing health insurance which is desperately needed
face an unknown future; retirement plans are lost: no security;
expecting my first grandchild:
won't be able to buy and do what I would have been able to do for him
can't play golf as often or eat out or take trips; forget the new truck
may have to leave state to get a decent job with benefits; I hope not.
who will hire me. I'm 52. (P.T.)

Changes

Dead dreams; new dreams
Money troubles; credit rating gone
Less spending, less money; less travel
Less repairs on home, car
Sold $3,000 harley for $2500
More time with kids; more time for hobbies
Dead dreams; new dreams (S.B.T.)

I write with my students, and through our writing and sharing they learn that I have much in common with them; I am as old as many of them are, and coal mining in my family goes back as far as my grandfather who was a coal miner after migrating to America from Italy. I am also the daughter of a coal miner who lost his life in a coal mine. My father was one of the 78 miners killed in the mine explosion heard around the world which occurred on November 20, 1968, when the Farmington Number Nine Mine owned by Consolidated Coal Company blew up. The only good thing to come out of this heinous tragedy was a change in weak mine safety regulations. I share the following:

Kohl Lined With Coal Dust

This newborn heart and his beat as one
Like Porgy, he sings
"Summertime"
His little honeybunch am I
And the livin' is easy
My first true love
Kohl lined from coal dust
I see his green eyes
His fabulous face I smell
Old Spicey, pinchy, smoke scented
Crisp, raw smell of just mowed grass
Mild misty rains of early spring
Sudden bursts of apple blossoms
Icing covered conifers of winter
Vanilla ice cream in sugar cones, he is
And hand-packed gallons
Hand picked berries in pies
Coconut birthdays, essence of orange cakes
Cosmic colorbursts, thunderbooms, Fourths of Julys
Old Glory, Ole Saint Nick Glory, Glory Hallelujah
Sandlot baseball, Sunday Mass,
Saturday Night boxing
Segovia's chords, the Fighting Irish,
Crayola colored mountain memories of autumn
The pride, heritage, grand child legacies
Style, sparkle, splendor, savoir-faire
Soft snowfalls of Christmases past
Memories become memories
Cognizance ceases, senses desensitize
The heartbeat of summertime gone
Kohl lined with coal dust
The explosion… I died

To my Dad, David Mainella, Sr.
From his honeybunch, Aida

Silence follows my reading. Now, for the first time, some of these miners understand that my experience was their experience.

As the course continues, some of my students' writing begins to turn toward a hopeful future …

I And Only I

At 44 years of age,
and unemployed
for the first time in my life,
I entered her class
with a lack of self confidence
and bitterness brewed by
a seemingly insensitive system
which allows loyal
productive workers

to be swept away
by the mere whims of those
who control our destinies.
Her wisdom,
compassion
and sensitivity
helped me to realize that
I, and only I,
could once again
direct my course
of future endeavor... (K.C.)

... while some cannot escape the past:

What Will I Do Now?
...we removed trolley wire and feed line,
fifty feet into the pit mouth
as well as the eighty-five pound rails;
we were told to build a barricade
so no one could reenter the Arkwright #l mine...
all the equipment, supplies
and tools abandoned in the mine
approximately $2,000,000 worth of
copper trolley and feedline...
Damn, I'm 50! What will I do now?
The nightmare is just beginning. (D.D.)

The miners' attitudes toward writing and reading have slowly, but distinctly, changed. At the onset of the program, they were adamantly against such folly. They knew the transition from the mines to a post-secondary education or training program would take some real doing. They understandably felt pressure, tension, and intimidation as they were forced to replay the long-extinct roles of students from twenty, thirty, forty, even fifty years ago. "Hooking" these students is as important as, if not more important than, hooking high school students. I knew that straight diet of academic exercises — memorizing times tables, diagramming sentences — was not the way to teach them. So we talked, we commiserated about the weather, the O.J. trial, the mines closing. We worked on resumes. We listened to the employment security people; we sat through lectures and seminars; we attended job fairs, we watched for job postings; we talked of divorce, drugs and alcohol problems; we did a little math and then we began to gravitate to reading. And then they began to write, to freewrite words, phrases, one or two sentences or maybe a paragraph; then a passage, a poem, an article.

More Miners Write

a foul odor
there is not too subtle pressure
a weight that leans on us
who are going to class daily
following all the rules
simply to draw a pittance of a pay
i smell a force trying to rid itself of us

why are we being pushed to
enter another training, mr. dulaney
to pacify the government; the state
the vo-techs, the politicians, the resa's
or simply to cover your ass
i smell a force trying to rid itself of us

we are frustrated with all your red tape
two point six million
allotted for our retraining
i suspect the funds are there
contrary to what you say
i smell a force trying to rid itself of us

poor uneducated coal miners
we sense the figures are not adding up
usually there is a certain foul odor
with large sums of money
allotments and disbursements
i smell a force trying to rid itself of us (S.T.)

* * *

Our Largest And Best Debt

...the new truck that I never could afford in previous years had to go. The log splitter was next. Our only means of enjoyment, the RV will be next. House repairs and the garage I was going to build this summer are now on hold. Since we can't sell our largest debt of all, she went to work to help provide the needs we usually provided. An honor student, a cheerleader, and now a hostess at a local restaurant, our pride and joy, our sixteen-year-old daughter is helping us share our new responsibilities. My wife and I are very proud and truly blessed to have such a child. We budget and compensate necessities for our survival. I say survival because it is no longer a life. Am I bitter? I don't think so. Do I blame Eastern Associated Coal? No! Who do I blame? I blame myself for not having the foresight to see what was coming and for not being better prepared... (D.S.)

Now they admit that it was not as difficult as they had earlier imagined. I witness as they witness their thoughts flowing from the brain, via the muscular arm, into the callused hand, through the dexterous fingers, into and out of the "Berol" pencil and magically spilling onto the ruled paper. Emotions, ideas, feelings stare back like a photograph in black and white. Many tell me that writing down their feelings or just journaling the day-to-day routines (routines so unlike that lifetime coal mining routine a lifetime ago), has not only become therapeutic but makes them feel as if they really can do something creative, innovative and worthwhile. They seem to say, "Now how many coal miners do you know who want to, like to and are able to read a good novel and write a little ditty?" They realize that thinking creatively and writing and reading for enjoyment are skills can in fact prepare them for real work. Now they feel prepared, motivated for the day they will be required to read a highly academic or technological piece or will be assigned to write an important report or letter.

Follow-up

Nine months have lapsed since the crew of coal miners-turned-students has exited my transition class. Four miners have received their GEDs (High School Equivalency Diploma); three were accepted into nursing school; about a half-dozen have passed the Journeyman Electrician Test, thus becoming certified, licensed electricians; a handful have left the state to work in nonunion coal mines in Pennsylvania and Alabama; a select few have enrolled in local colleges. Four, I am told, are attempting to receive disability payments due to cancer, impaired learning ability, heart conditions (in the last six months, two men in their forties have suffered heart attacks). The majority of the class is presently attending or have attended local vocational-technical schools, taking courses in fields such as robotics, electronics building construction, heating, plumbing, and air conditioning. But one hundred percent of the miners are still looking for a good job to support themselves and their families. And down deep within the somber, silent souls of each and every one of these inexhaustible men and women lies a shred of hope that the coal mines soon will reopen and that any sweet day now, the miners will return to the job that was so secure, the job they want, the job they were comfortable with, the job down deep within the underbelly of West Virginia, doing what they do best: B.T.'s poem capsulizes their anger, pain, and hope.

Interruptions

We'd rather be in the pit
Working night and day
Than playing the part of scholars
To draw one tenth the pay
Frustrated with all the red tape
A subtle form of rape
Changes beyond our control
We were shoved and forced to enroll
To calm certain people with clout
Now they are shoving us out
To wash our benefits out
Why interrupt our class
We are learning new skills, at last
Refreshing dim memories
To receive federal monies
Good counseling in our midst
The education we almost missed
You insult us and those who teach
No funds you constantly preach
Get into another school
You take us for a fool
Why do you interrupt our brain
Have we not enough pain and strain (B.T.)

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"Otherness" and Other Imponderables: Teaching Hmong Students Academic Writing

by

MARK BALHORN AND LAURIE MEYER

◆

Standing near the receptionist's desk in our writing lab, we overhear Helen, one our tutors, bidding good-bye to her learner.

"See you next week," says Helen, "and have a happy Groundhog Day!"

"Good-bye," replies Blong, a Hmong freshman who had been in the US only five years, "and Happy..." then there is a long pause "... just what *is* 'Groundhog Day,' anyway?"

Helen herself looks a little bewildered by the question. She turns to us, "Uh Mark ...Laurie...?"

And thus began an hour-long discussion of strange customs and superstitions, a discussion which underscored the problems we face when tutoring learners who have practically no background knowledge in our culture, nor we in theirs. Fortunately this particular learner had a wonderful sense of the absurd, a capacity that served him well as we discussed Groundhog Day and other cultural oddities.

The HELP Program

The past decade has seen a large influx of South East Asian (SEA) permanent residents, particularly Hmong, into our state school system. Some of them have matriculated to our school, the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, where, unfortunately, they have not enjoyed a high success rate. Hoping to help them, faculty and staff from the Tutoring-Learning Center (TLC), the English department, and the Educational Support Program developed the Hmong English Literacy Program (HELP), a tutoring support program designed to provide assistance for those of our Hmong students most at risk. Our experience and research had informed us that academic essay writing would be difficult for Hmong students. Therefore, our short-term goal was to assist them in understanding, revising, and editing assignments in a required freshman composition class; long-term, we hoped to help students develop study and writing habits, as well as coping strategies that would lead to academic success.

The program we devised is not unique; certainly the staff of many small, primarily undergraduate state universities have responded similarly to sudden influxes of students with special needs. Thus, our emphasis in this article is not on the theoretical design or daily procedures of the program. Instead, we focus on the learners and tutors and the relationships they formed over the course of the year-long pilot program. After a brief description of how the program was conducted, we profile the academic difficulties of the learners and how tutors and staff responded, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. We also discuss the effect of this experience, not only on the learners as revealed in their evaluations of the program and final grades, but also on our young, cross-culturally inexperienced tutors.

How The Program Worked

In HELP, each of the Hmong students was matched with a specially selected and trained tutor. Tutor and learner met for at least an hour weekly to discuss current assignments in freshman English 101, clarifying reading assignments, brainstorming ideas, examining drafts. Four of the tutors, Melissa, Anne, Helen, and Marie, were student peers, upperclassmen who had successfully completed a three-credit tutoring practicum and were already employed by the TLC. The other tutor, Allan, was a highly-regarded emeritus professor. All five received additional training that included cultural and historical information on the Hmong, descriptions of the kinds of writing problems common to second-language writers, and methods for addressing these problems.

Two Challenges: Reading Comprehension and Background Knowledge

As we met biweekly with our tutors, a profile of the literacy problems of our SEA learners emerged. The first and most glaring deficit was the very low reading comprehension of the weakest learners, an inadequacy some of our tutors felt poorly equipped to handle. Melissa, for example, noted that one of her learners, Bee, came to the tutoring sessions wanting to discuss the extensive readings that paralleled the writing assignments. Grinning with enthusiasm, he would appear at each session with a long list of vocabulary words for his tutor to define. Though Melissa knew this was supposed to be a writing tutorial, she spent most of the hour defining terms and helping him understand the text. It took several minutes, she said, shaking her head, to explain the cultural significance of the phrase "a surge of patriotic pride on seeing the statue of liberty" in a reading about the dispute over ownership of Ellis Island. She wondered aloud how we could improve the writing of those who could not read college-level texts.

We suggested to Melissa and the others that they keep the reading comprehension work to a half hour and that they try to move learners away from studying lists of vocabulary out of context, instead limiting themselves to a few key discussions such as those of the "patriotic pride..." type, tying these key words to concepts within learners' current background knowledge. We wanted tutors also to understand that their learners' deficits weren't simply a lack of vocabulary, but rather a lack of background knowledge, more particularly a mismatch between the background knowledge of their first culture and that of the United States. Finally, we regularly reminded tutors that they could not hope to make up their learners' deficits in only 15 weeks, that it would only be with more time in this country and continued extensive reading that their clients would eventually fill in the more critical gaps of background knowledge.

Most tutors were assured and encouraged by this advice and limited vocabulary discussions to key terms and main ideas. Marie, for example, explained to us how she now first asked her learner Xiong to tell her what the reading was about. Given his mostly-accurate oral summary, she could quickly skim the two-to-three page text, deriving its gist. Then, after asking Xiong a few clarifying questions, Marie pinpointed the two or three key concepts he wasn't getting and provided Xiong with the appropriate context. The whole thing took only about 15 minutes per reading, she claimed, and seemed to put Xiong at ease.

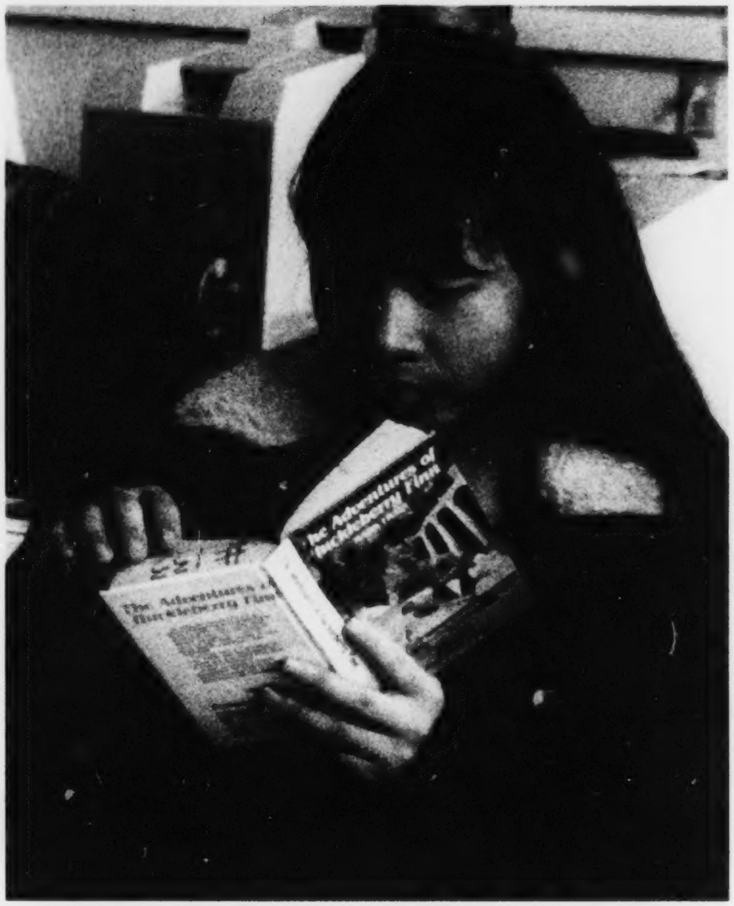
He had no idea of what "otherness" meant or what it had to do with essays about people finding a whale on the beach...

But at least two tutors remained unconvinced by our advice to de-emphasize direct vocabulary study. Allan, the emeritus professor, requested an English-Hmong dictionary for use with his learners. How else, he exclaimed, could he define the word "stencil" encountered in one of their readings? Though we really doubted that any neat, direct translation for this word could be found since this device was unlikely to be relevant to traditional Hmong culture, we did provide him with a dictionary and the address of a Hmong-English language website. Likewise Melissa, though she followed our advice, remained skeptical of how her learners with such limited vocabularies could succeed.

Then tutors and learners made a discovery which lessened their anxiety. They realized that the readings in freshman English served primarily as models of acceptable writing, and that comprehension of the reading was not tested. At this point, reading comprehension became a lower priority, lack of background knowledge was no longer a major problem, and the tutorials turned back toward working on clients' writing, as we had originally intended.

The Challenge of Classroom Discourse

Our tutors spent a lot of their time explaining professors' assignments and discussing appropriate responses with their clients. Most of our HELP learners came to the university with only the four to six years of exposure to classroom discourse they had experienced in junior high and high school, and much of this was in relatively nonacademic ESL classes. So, although they were, for the most part, fluent speakers of English, this fluency was of a conversational variety ill-suited to the abstract, impersonal discourse used in argumentative writing and discussions of literature. Likewise, the learning and perceptual styles of many Hmong was not suited to American classrooms. Traditional skills of memorization, repetition and formulaic response that have been features of their learning, do not suit the university classroom. Thus, it was not uncommon for learners to come to their tutors carrying copies of writing assignments they either did not understand at all, or understood, but had no idea how to complete.


The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

For their part, the tutors were hesitant to direct their learners too firmly. Though tutors could, of course, understand the written assignment, they had not necessarily read the assigned readings and usually had not attended a lecture. Since instructors' directions often assume students' knowledge of both readings and lectures, tutors had to take extra pains to make sure they were directing their learners down the proper course.

Thai, the one Vietnamese student in the program, for example, found himself paralyzed when the first two-page essay of the semester was assigned on the topic of "otherness." For the previous two weeks, the class had been reading philosophical and speculative essays of writers' encounters with the natural world and their attempts to come to terms with it. Though Thai thought he had understood the readings and much of what his professor had said about them, he had no idea of what "otherness" meant or what it had to do with essays about people finding a whale on the beach, a weasel under a bush, or spiders on a desk. He knew how to write a paper with a thesis and topic sentences, he told Anne, his tutor, and he knew how to write stories, but neither seemed right for this paper on "otherness."

To better understand what Thai's professor wanted, Anne decided to examine one of the assigned readings, an essay by Annie Dillard about the author's chance meeting with a weasel. In relating the incident, Dillard speculates about what it is like to live as a wild creature and what the weasel's thoughts and concerns might be; in effect, what it is like to be the other.

Anne and Thai met a second time that week, and she was able to get him started on his paper. Because she knew from previous discussions that Thai was an avid angler, she asked him to bring in a photo of his biggest fish and to tell her the story of how he had caught it. He quite happily did this, showing up with a photo of a four-foot fish and a breathless 10-minute fish story of how he had caught it. Anne then asked him a variety of questions: What was that fish thinking when it took your lure? What do you think was going on in its head while you were battling it? How did it feel after you caught it and were holding it in your hands? From their discussion emerged a rough draft that they discussed the following week and a final draft that earned Thai a 'B.'

Though Thai had certainly written autobiographical essays before, probably even about fishing, and he had practiced writing five-paragraph argumentative papers on topical subjects in his ESL writing classes, he had never encountered the personal essay, a genre that though superficially autobiographical, actually addresses issues of common interest. His conversations with Anne introduced him to this added dimension of the personal essay and allowed him to apply previously acquired writing skills to this new mode of expression. It was clear to us that Anne had assisted her learner not just through her knowledge of college-level discourses, but just as importantly, through her knowledge of Thai. By knowing his strengths and interests, she was able to show him a way into the assignment.

Problems at the Sentence Level

By mid-semester, most learner-tutor pairs had settled into predictable patterns. Though a learner occasionally would show up asking for help on beginning the assignment, most came with a draft and the tutor and the learner spent the hour discussing rhetorical devices such as example, explanation and clarification, to improve it. Both tutors and learners were making progress. One problem that remained, however, concerned editing of grammar errors. The SEA learners in the program had continuing problems with subject-verb agreement, tense, and word forms. At first, we thought that if we recruited tutors with a background in grammar and linguistics, they could show learners how to edit their own writing. But this did not happen. Even tutors with a solid understanding of English grammar felt overwhelmed. Melissa, for example, wrote in her evaluation of the program at the end of the first semester, "I don't feel my expertise lies in determining what the [grammar] problems of students are." She noted that no matter what she said or which grammar exercises she assigned, "[my learner] had a great deal of trouble applying [what he'd learned] in his own writing." Likewise, Allan, the other tutor with a background in English grammar saw little improvement with his learners. Not only did he not see fewer errors in their writing, but he questioned whether they understood his explanations in the first place since all three of his learners seemed to hold only hazy notions of such basic terminology as "subject," "verb," and "noun."

Traditional skills of memorization, repetition and formulaic response that have been features of (the Hmong students') learning do not suit the university classroom.

Given the limited success of the two tutors equipped with meta-grammatical knowledge, we instructed all tutors to just read through student papers, either pausing at ungrammatical passages or bracketing them. Our hope was that with repeated attention to recurrent grammar problems, learners would recognize patterns and learn to self-edit. Though some tutors claimed to have seen improvement in the editing skills of learners by the end of the semester, that may not have been true in all cases. For example, Anne claimed proudly at the midpoint of the semester that Thai was able to self-edit. She excitedly told the group of tutors and staff that as she read his paper out loud he would catch every error and correct it. Since Thai had been enrolled in remedial ESL writing courses the two semesters previous to this and was already known by us for his intractable grammatical problems, we were skeptical and asked Anne for more details.

It became clear that when she read Thai's paper out loud, she would pause after every error and Thai, recognizing his cue, would then offer an alternative. Anne claimed that he almost always got it right on the first or second try. We suggested that instead of pausing after each error, that she read the problematic sentence to the end without a pause and see if Thai could identify the error. As we pointed out to her, if the error was an omitted 's' on a noun as in the phrase "some boy_," for example, Thai had a 100% chance of getting it correct if she paused after "boy."

Anne did not mention Thai's self-editing prowess again that semester and there were no effusive statements to that effect in her written evaluation of the program at the end of the semester. She did, however, state in the concluding paragraph that Thai was becoming "a better and better guesser all the time."

Cross-Cultural Issues

Though we had tried to inform ourselves about Hmong culture as best we could before this tutorial began, we wondered whether there would be any cross-cultural complications. Would familial priorities or differing ideas about deadlines and appointments disrupt weekly tutorial commitments? Or, given our largely young and female staff and our largely male (except for Mai learners, would cultural notions about gender and authority get in the way of professional relationships? Evidently, all our worries were misplaced. In regard to appointments, though learners were only required to make 10 of 13 appointments throughout the semester, they averaged 11. In addition, without exception all tutors developed friendly and professional working relationships with their learners. However, one relationship problem did arise — between two learners. Whether or not it can be attributed to cultural factors is not clear.

> ***Thai told Anne about interracial dating, about teachers who had called him "stupid," and about a baseball bat he carried in his car for self-defense.***

Two of Marie's clients were a married couple, Kao and Mai. On the day of Mai's first scheduled session, she appeared with her husband, Kao. It quickly became obvious that Kao intended to remain beside his wife throughout the duration of the tutorial. "No problem," he said to Marie, "I won't bother you." Marie asked why he wanted to stay, but Kao had no reason. He simply stated that they "always did it this way." Mai said nothing and tried not to look at either Marie or her husband.

After checking with our secretary, Marie found that indeed, previous to the HELP program, Kao had always accompanied his wife to tutorial sessions. Marie, however, given her western sensibilities regarding the independence of women and her belief in what tutoring is about, could see no reason for Kao's presence at his wife's tutorial. She explained to Kao that since he and Mai had different teachers, they would have different writing assignments. Moreover, because they were different people, they were bound to have different tutorial needs, just the fact that the program was meant to address. We agreed with Marie and told her so, and after a discussion between Marie and Kao, the husband agreed to wait for his wife in the lobby.

Effects upon Tutors

Although we were generally satisfied with the progress learners were making, it was more difficult for some tutors to remain so sanguine. Two, in fact, became extremely discouraged and began to question the entire project. Melissa, as mentioned earlier, continued to doubt her effectiveness as a tutor and the likelihood that her clients would succeed. She thought that instead of a tutorial program, HELP students "would benefit from a back-to-basics course that would lead them through simple paper-writing techniques." Allan, though he praised his two learners, Por and Zong, as "intelligent and responsible workers," felt that their "grasp of English vocabulary and syntax [was] yet far from university level" and that "they should not have been registered in English 101" in the first place. We reminded them both that success should be judged less by increased accuracy in initial production, and more by the development of improved editing, revision, and discussion strategies. After all, we were there to help, not to work miracles. Unconvinced, these two tutors withdrew from the program at the end of one semester.

The other tutors had positive experiences, more personal than one might expect. Neither Anne nor Helen had ever had a sustained relationship with someone from a different culture prior to the tutorial program, and they both commented at the end of the semester about how much they had learned from their clients. Anne became particularly close to Thai. She told us how she had gained a profound respect for this learner. He told her about interracial dating, about teachers who had called him "stupid," and about a baseball bat he carried in his car for self-defense. Anne had a good look at what life is like for a refugee trying to succeed in America. Though it has been more than a year since Blong and Thai have been part of HELP, both continue to visit the tutoring center and their former HELP tutors for assistance with papers they are writing for other classes.

Effects upon Learners

All of the students passed English 101; in fact, the mean final grade of the nine was a solid 'C' (2.03/4.00). They told us they were more aware of what their writing problems were and what they could do about them.

Students realized that they continued to have problems with grammatical accuracy, and they understood that the grammar problems would not magically go away, but they believed that despite these problems they could succeed at the university. Blong, for example, wrote in his final evaluation of the tutorial that he knew his problems were not going to be addressed in English 101 as, "People in college are supposed to know grammar already." He explained that his weak grammar was due to his missing "school at the early levels" and the fact that "[i]n [American] high schools, they also did not teach grammar."

A technical knowledge of English grammar is not the most accurate predictor of success (for tutors of) SEA permanent residents.

Working with our tutors, students also realized that past rhetorical approaches would not always be effective in college writing classrooms. Pao, asked by his professor to write a descriptive paper involving the senses of sight, hearing, and smell, wrote in his final evaluation of how he "described in a mixture type of way" all three senses within a single paragraph as he "had been taught to write in high school." However, the teacher's reaction to his draft was not what the student expected: "... the surprising part about it was that the instructor expected me to write a paper with separate paragraphs that contained different ideas!" Pao was able to take his draft to his tutor and together they transformed his "surprise" into an effective revision strategy that resulted in a draft that met the teacher's expectations. The student concluded, "[A]fter I tried this different kind of writing technique, I felt that I have built a more effective way toward writing a descriptive paper."

Finally, there was evidence of students' developing attitudes and habits toward the writing process that would carry them far beyond freshman English. Shoua concluded his evaluation with advice for fellow Hmong students. The advice he gives applies to all students but particularly to second language learners: one must first be sure to understand the assignment before gathering information and writing a draft.

> *The first thing I do before I start my English paper is talk to my professor. I tell my professor to see if I have the correct ideas for my paper and ask to see what more things I should do to make my paper better. Then I look for the sources and write my paper. After I write the paper, I have my tutor see what I got and what more information do I need. It . . . takes time to write out a good paper.*

This conclusion is particularly relevant for the many SEA permanent residents who have not had twelve years of American education before beginning university study. It is only through a careful, methodical approach to the completion of writing assignments that they can succeed.

Conclusion

Though university faculty and staff initiated this project, its success rested squarely on the shoulders of the tutors and learners. The tutors, primarily undergraduate juniors and seniors with little relevant life experience and only two or three courses in ESL and refugee-related subjects, treated their tutoring responsibilities very professionally. They remained dedicated to their clients throughout the semester, often running over the allotted one-hour time slot and spending their own time seeking help either from TLC staff or by themselves in the resource room. Knowing very little about tutoring Hmong refugees before the program began, these university upperclassmen educated themselves about their clients' needs and developed appropriate techniques to meet them. Indeed, it was their determination to help these learners that led two of them to become so discouraged over what they perceived as their clients' lack of progress that they dropped out of the program.

That two of our most capable tutors left the program indicates that we must refocus tutor recruitment. Through the first year of the pilot project it had become clear that a technical knowledge of English grammar is not the most accurate predictor of success with SEA permanent residents. Rather the prospective tutor must show an interest in foreign languages and cultures and make a professional commitment to language teaching. In subsequent semesters, the only tutors brought into the program will be those who have consistently expressed an interest to work with nonnative speakers and who are already enrolled in programs granting degrees or certificates in language teaching, especially ESL.

As for the learners, their interest in the tutorial never wavered. In spite of commitments to family, job, and other classes, their attendance at scheduled tutorial sessions was, as mentioned before, nearly perfect. Evidently, they saw their HELP tutors as an important part of their education. Since we also see it that way, we will continue to offer the HELP program, and with continued support from the university, possibly expand it.

The low reading comprehension of the learners was one problem that the tutorial never adequately addressed, and though that was not an important factor for success in English 101, the students' low reading comprehension is bound to become a factor in subsequent courses such as English 102, the second semester of freshman English which emphasizes research writing and requires the synthesizing of information from printed sources. However, the resourcefulness of our tutors and the determination of our SEA students will, we are sure, create a reading tutorial every bit as successful as our writing tutorial.

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Thanks to Sue Clark Kubley of the Educational Support Program for information regarding the academic histories of the learners both prior and subsequent to their enrollment in HELP.

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You Know More than You Think You Do: A New Look at "Write What You Know"

by

MICHAEL FARRINGTON

◆

"Write what you know" is one of the great war horses of writing advice. Traditionally it has meant to write about only what you have experienced. Thankfully, Jerome Stern, in *Making Shapely Fiction*, helped expand that definition by explaining that there are many ways of knowing; research and imagination, for example, are two definite "form[s] of knowledge." Stern prefers this statement in reverse: "Don't write what you don't know."

Backward or forward, however, this statement is usually in response to one question: What *subject* do I write about? Thus, "write what you know" directs a student writer toward selecting a topic — or for the student of fiction writing, toward selecting setting, characters, events. For me, there is another important meaning to the phrase "write what you know," a meaning that helps me fight writer's block every morning as I sit down at my desk or computer.

This is my way of defining that statement, "Write what you know." I describe the picture that's in my head right now. I write down the words that the voice in my head is speaking, the one idea that's clear to me at that moment.

We all have stories inside us. Stories are not made like tables, where you assemble all the materials and tools around you and then cut and shape to put those materials together. Stories are not made from the outside but from within. The writer's goal is to find a way to bring these stories out, to discover what we know.

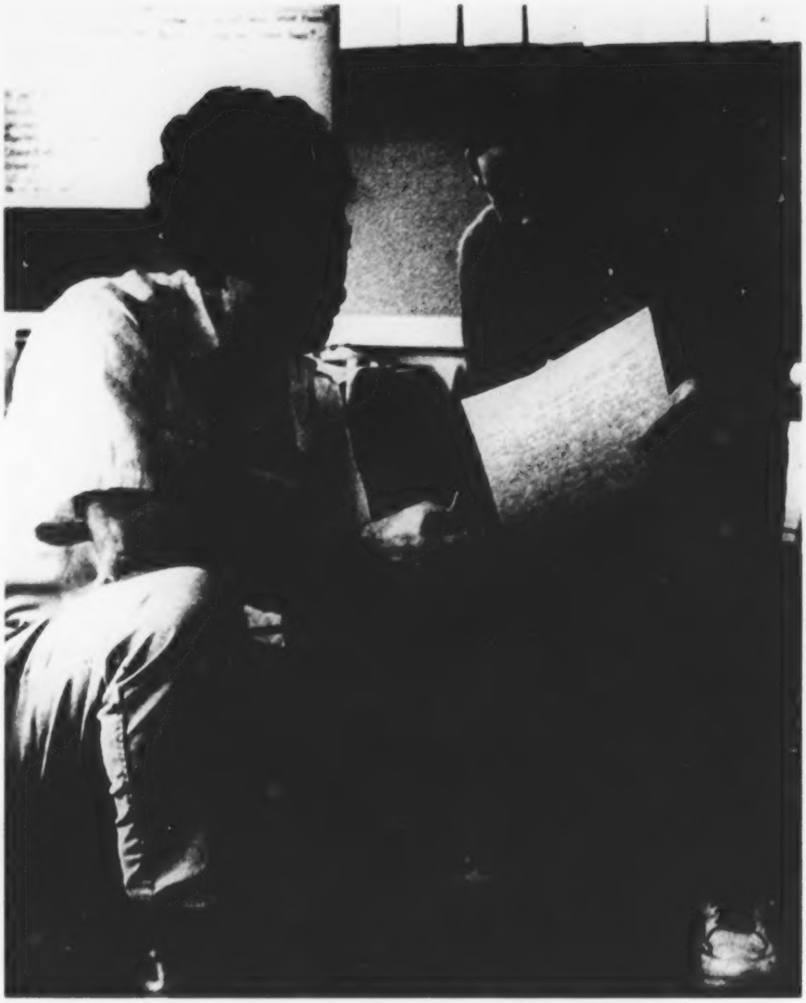
What follows is an account of the way the dictum "Write what you know" proved relevant in the writing of my first novel:

For several days before I start my novel, "Manion," I carry around in my mind one particular image: a young woman, seventeen or eighteen years old, standing on the sidewalk in front of an empty city lot; behind her, a few scraps of paper blow against a wire fence, and the sun makes bits of broken glass sparkle. It is a small New England city, most likely in Maine, and thus I decide it must be Portland. The young woman—whose name is Jennifer—has shoulder-length dark hair and a plump, innocent face. Although I somehow "know" it is early summer, she wears a long red wool coat. Two suitcases stand beside her, one on either side like walls for protection. Down the block is a bus station, and she has moved away from it, I surmised, in order to be spotted by whomever she expects to pick her up.

This is the extent of the image; this is all I know. I resist writing it. Instead I worry about all I don't know. I speculate: Who is this young woman? Where has she come from? Why is she there? Who is she waiting for? I make up answers, but they all seem false. They are intellectual fabrications designed to make me feel less uncomfortable about how little I really know.

Finally I decide to trust that I do know something, and I might as well start by writing it. I describe the image as fully as I can. And when I finish, more images appear. A car pulls up with a man and woman inside. Jennifer leans forward nervously to look in the window, then smiles in relief. "Sorry we're late," says the woman in the car, and the trunk pops open and the man gets out to help Jennifer with her bags.

Writing what you know requires trust in the process and in the belief that stories are inside us, at a deeper level than the intellect, and once we have written what we know, the act of writing will allow our mind to release that initial knowledge to make room for something else for us to know. It's writing without fear of consequence, too; we must record what is there at the moment, regardless of whether or not it matches what we think we ought to be writing. As a result, writing what you know can be both frightening and frustrating—but can also provide great rewards.



Sometimes those rewards are as simple as seeing something totally unexpected come together in a story. I wrote a story a few years ago about a 78-year-old man named Charlie who begins having dreams in which every person in his dream is someone he used to know who is now dead. The fact that he is interacting with these dead people in his dreams upsets Charlie, and after the third dream-filled night in a row, Charlie gets up at three A.M. and walks into his back yard. As I was writing that scene, I realized he heard a noise in the bushes, and he wondered if it was the fox he'd seen lurking around the edges of his property the last few days.

I had never anticipated bringing a fox into this story, but since that's what I knew Charlie thought, I wrote it, figuring if I didn't find more use for the fox later, I could always go back and take it out.

Over the course of the story, Charlie comes to believe that these dreams are an omen that he is about to die. Near the end of the story, to prove to himself that he is still vigorous, he decides to walk two miles to a bridge over a stream—a favorite spot he and his wife used to walk to when they were younger. For the 78-year-old Charlie it's a grueling walk in the summer heat, and when he reaches the bridge he decides to go down to the water to cool off. Unfortunately, there's only a dirt path down the hill, and he stumbles and falls. Lying at the bottom of the hill, injured and shaken, all alone at sunset beneath a lightly- travelled country road surrounded by pastureland and forest, Charlie looks up and sees, on the other side of the stream, the fox.

I did not plan this, at least not at the intellectual level. I simply followed the pictures in my head, recording what I knew when I knew it, and when Charlie looked up, he and I saw the fox at the same time.

Sometimes, the rewards from writing what you know are enormous. When I finished *Manion*, I knew that I had written a better book than I'd ever believed myself capable of writing; unquestionably I'd written a better book than I could have ever intellectually created.

For the last few years, I've been practicing an elementary form of meditation before I write. For the first fifteen minutes or so, I try to let my mind clear. Then in the final few minutes, I consciously welcome images into my mind. I do not force them; I try not to struggle. In a sense, I believe I am asking this deeper part of myself to show me what I know. When I have some image, even — as we'll see below — if it's a single shelf on a bookcase, I'll write it down, and trust that once that knowledge is written, more will slide in to take its place.

As a writing teacher, I look for ways to help my students understand that they don't have to have an entire story in mind when they begin to write — they can simply write what they know. In the semester's first meeting of "Introduction to Fiction Writing," I lead students through a visualization in which I ask them to close their eyes and imagine a room. Because this is a fiction class, I tell them this will not be a room they've seen before, even if it looks like one they know. "Try to see the room in your mind," I instruct. "Let it come into focus like a photograph. See colors. Shapes. From where you are positioned, what's in front of you? What's to the left? To the right? Above? What's the floor like? What's the quality of the light?

"Don't worry," I continue, "if you see only partial images, or even if those images change. Don't worry if there are many blank spaces in your picture. Focus on what you see, not on what you don't."

As the visualization goes on, I suggest the appearance of a character, and then a second, in much the same way as I suggested the room. Eventually I tell students that so long as they have seen something, regardless of how fuzzy, strange or partial, they should open their eyes and begin to describe what they have seen. They should write quickly and noncritically, simply recording. They are like reporters, I tell them, impartially describing the pictures in their mind.

I start with this exercise because I want students to become familiar with the notion of fiction as a process of recording the pictures in their heads. Afterwards, when we discuss how it went, nearly everyone claims to have seen some pictures, and most say their writing came easier and at greater length than it would have had I not taken them through the process.

As a writing teacher, I look for ways to help my students understand that they don't have to have an entire story in mind when they begin to write — they can simply write what they know.

Whatever is at work in this exercise, I believe the most important advice I give students is to focus on what they see — what they "know"— and not to worry about what they don't see. I didn't realize how important the advice was until I was speaking with one student who'd had a terrible time with the exercise, and who had ultimately deemed it a failure for herself. "You said I was supposed to be seeing a room," she said, "but all I could see was one shelf of a bookcase. Everything else was blank."

"Did you describe the shelf?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I started to, but then it seemed stupid so I stopped. It was only a bookshelf, nothing around it, like it was floating out in space. But when I tried to see other parts of the room I couldn't see anything."

"You couldn't see the rest of the room," I said, "because you didn't know it yet. What you knew was that shelf. But you didn't write it."

And I heard myself saying: "Write what you know."

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Getting Real:
Authenticity in Writing Prompts

by

PATRICIA A. SLAGLE

◆

Let's say that in the last year, three serious traffic accidents have occurred near your school at the corner of Sycamore and G streets. Now, in your class it's time for a persuasive essay prompt, and one of your students decides to convince the reader (you) that it is high time to install stops signs at this dangerous intersection. The student does a more than capable job, performing on-the-spot observations at the intersection, interviewing police officers, collecting anecdotes from students who have experienced close calls at this corner. This is "A" work, and when you hand back the papers you make the student aware of your enthusiasm for her arguments. But, alas, there are still no stop signs at Sycamore and G.

The problem is, of course, that you are neither the chief of police nor the mayor, and those are the folks who should be hearing these arguments. The obvious answer, but one that alluded me until fairly recently, is that the student should have communicated directly with these officials; she should have been encouraged to engage in what is these days called authentic writing. Authenticity is a key concept that I have learned to keep in mind when designing writing prompts.

Traditionally trained, I was not introduced to the concepts of audience, purpose, and form as integral components of writing assignments until I participated in a writing project. Previously I made writing assignments that required students to write academic pieces such as essays, themes, or reports. My students knew I was the only person who would read their finished work. They also knew that my primary reason for reading their writing was to assign a grade.

Now I ask students to write pieces for a genuine audience beyond the classroom, using a real-world form such as a letter to the editor. Their purpose is to communicate effectively with that reader whether to persuade the reader to agree with their position on an issue, share their sentiments in a memoir, present their solution to a mutual problem, or explore numerous other possibilities determined by the student/writer. Writing for audiences beyond the teacher using authentic forms, and writing for real reasons, produces more effective writing.

I want to describe some of the authentic writing prompts I have used, but at the outset I want to make clear what authentic writing is not. Sometimes we become creative in our lesson planning and ask students to assume the persona of someone else and write a piece from that person's perspective. They may become homeless persons, presidents, or characters in literature. Role playing of this sort can provide a useful exercise, but it is not authentic writing. Authentic writing implies that the student is writing in his or her voice to a real living person or group about a matter of concern. A role playing prompt may have valuable writing-to-learn potential, allowing a teacher to see how well a student understands a concept, but it allows little room for developing a personal voice.

When I have asked students to write from a perspective other than their own, I have added yet another challenge to the one they were already facing when I asked them to compose, revise, and edit. This is an unnecessary writing burden that can be avoided if I design prompts that allow students to write from their own knowledge and perspective in their own voices.

Consider two writing assignments:

"Imagine you are the drama critic for your local newspaper. Write a review of an imaginary production of the play that we have just finished studying in class." This prompt asks students to assume the contrived role of a professional writer and drama critic. Most students, even if they happen to be familiar with drama reviews, would not he able to successfully assume that persona therefore producing a piece that would have problems not only with voice but also with meaningful support and development. The result: the piece striving for authenticity would in fact be inauthentic.

I developed a more effective alternative: "Write a letter to the producing director of your local theater company in which you present arguments in an effort to persuade him/her to include a production of the play that we have just finished studying in class in the upcoming season." The student is expected to state and defend a position. Yet this prompt allows the student to write as herself, in her own voice. Writing in her own voice, she builds into her argument concrete references to personal experience. Of course, this prompt would constitute authentic writing only for those students who, in fact, would like to see the play produced. Note the naturalness with which Jeff, who *was* an advocate for Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra*, communicates with his audience:

> *Dear Mr. Jory,*
>
> *Recently we held an election for President of our country. We saw many examples of fighting, bickering, and debating between the candidates. All of this was intended to convince the American people to choose the 'right' candidate for their leader.*
>
> *In George Bernard Shaw's* Caesar and Cleopatra, *Ptolemy and Cleopatra are vying for power using verbal sparring and subtle threats in much the same way as today's presidential candidates. Why not show the public that the methods of political competition have not changed in two thousand years? Anyone who has watched the election closely would not only find this parallel intriguing but enlightening."*

Jeff mailed his letter and in fact received a reply from the producing director that gave Jeff and his classmates insight into the director's play selection considerations. The producing director wrote that *Caesar and Cleopatra* was "simply too expensive for Actors' Theatre to perform because of the large number of people in the cast and the stage setting demanded."

Previously I made writing assignments that required students to write academic pieces such as essays, themes, or reports. My students knew I was the only person who would read their finished work. They also knew that my primary reason for reading their writing was to assign a grade.

The director also invited our class to attend a dress rehearsal at the theater, an example of how a piece of authentic writing helped us build an authentic link to the community.

The basic question for the teacher in developing authentic prompts is, "How can I turn what could be an academic exercise into something real?"

After studying Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, I might once have asked students to respond to a typical prompt, a variation on, "Write a literary analysis essay in which you analyze the strengths and weaknesses of Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*."

We English teachers have been giving such assignments for decades and decrying the unimaginative writing that results. But now, as a creator of authentic prompts, I had another idea: I pulled out Brian Ford's February, 1993 *English Journal* article, "Choosing the Canon" and asked students to read it. I asked them to write to Ford stating "your position regarding his thesis that *A Tale of Two Cities* should be eliminated from the curriculum. Then defend your position with sound arguments and reasoning." By identifying a concrete audience and specific purpose in the prompt, students were able to write without trying to figure out what they imagined I wanted them to say, which so often happened when I used non-authentic analysis prompts. Rather, students were clear about how to proceed in developing their pieces and free to write in their own voices rather than trying to emulate some imagined academic tone.

To my pleasant surprise, only a small minority of students agreed with Mr. Ford's thesis that *A Tale of Two Cities* should be eliminated from the high school curriculum. The following representative samples demonstrate the genuineness of the students' voices. This is not the style students adapt when they are writing what they think the teacher wants to hear. Andre's response:

> *You say the book is politically naive, but that is exactly what is needed at the point this book is taught. Most students who read this are also just learning about the history of France, including the Revolution. Many would be completely lost if this book was a complex analysis of French government. This book helps give a basic grasp of what went on during the French Revolution without seeming to be teaching.*

Ryan finds *A Tale of Two Cities* attractive to modern teens in a way Ford has overlooked:

> *When one thinks of teenagers, what are some television shows that come to mind? Perhaps soap operas or "Beverly Hills 90210." Now ask: what are the elements of these programs that make them so appealing to teenagers? The answer is simple: romantic intrigue.* A Tale of Two Cities *has romantic intrigue in abundance.*

Similarly Jill:

> *How do you propose to get a class full of teenagers, with their minds on dates and zits, rather than Dickens and Shakespeare, to read a novel, if it's boring? If we have to cut short our phone time, and read a book, the book better be entertaining, or else it'll end up in the back pack, unread. For me, that didn't happen with* A Tale of Two Cities. *The book was so full of twists and turns, that it was hard to put down. At the end of each installment was a catch that made me want to read on. All the scandalous excitement in the novel made it very appealing to me and my classmates."*

Very few, if any, of my literary analysis essay prompts have generated such genuine, authentic, natural, and readable responses.

Unlike our local theatre director, Brian Ford did not answer my students. One of the real world messages built into the authentic writing process is that even the sincerest communication may be ignored or otherwise fall through the cracks. On another occasion my students wrote letters to Steve Martin inquiring about his writing process in adapting Rostand's *Cryano* for his screenplay *Roxanne*. Despite research into probable addresses, letters were returned as undeliverable or else we heard nothing at all.

One of the real world messages built into the authentic writing process is that even the sincerest communication may be ignored or otherwise fall through the cracks.

Providing prompts that identify an authentic audience, purpose and form for students before they begin composing is certainly not limited to literary response writing assignments. For example, sources abound in the newspaper: "Write a piece for the 'Bright Ideas' column that appears daily in the Features section of our local newspaper." (This feature solicits contributions from readers.)

Shannon wrote:

> *It's been raining all day; therefore you'd rather stay in out of the mud. So much for being a couch potato because only re-runs are showing today. Now you are sitting home alone and bored to death. Here's an idea you may want to try: make a 'Things To Do Kit.'*

Robbie's effort may have had the effect of increasing local sales of a certain soft drink:

> *Do you ever have trouble cleaning those big dirty windows outside? Well, if you're like me you do, and I have a tip for you that may be very useful in cleaning them. Take one cup of vinegar and mix it*

> *with 1/3 of a cup of baking soda. Even though it may sound weird, it's time to add an odd ingredient which, nevertheless, works. That weird ingredient is Coke, but you must make sure that it's a can of Coca-Cola Classic.*

Yet another source of authentic writing has been our own school. My students developed a high school survival guide for freshmen. Charlos told a cautionary tale:

> *Do you know how to survive high school?? What do you need to know about how to survive? And how can you make surviving it simple for you?*
>
> *Here's Bob. Bob is very excited about going to high school, but when he got there, things were not as he thought. Bob's grades began to fall, because he wouldn't get up early and come to school. during he times that Bob came to school, he often didn't eel like doing the work he was assigned. Bob fell a couple of months behind and never got caught up....*
>
> *School is not as hard as some people think. As you enter high school, you are going to have butterflies in your stomach. That's natural don't panic. Remember your attitude makes all the difference in the world.*

Another school-based prompt asked students to "develop a guide for ESL students in which you explain various English-language idioms." Joe began his entry:

> *The English language can be confusing and tough to learn because there are so many expressions that need to be learned in addition to the basics idioms in particular can be very strange. For instance, the phrase "birds of a feather flock together" has nothing to do with birds at all...*

The ESL guide and the high school survival guide were not "published" in the traditional sense. However, I believe they both qualify as authentic writing as they were delivered to the intended audience in their classroom as a prelude to class visits. When the classes met together, the ESL students and my students discussed idioms in the various represented languages. The ninth grade students and my upperclassmen discussed high school expectations and pitfalls.

The ESL and high school survival guides have been catalogued and placed in the school media center for use by any students who would find them useful or interesting.

I do not intend to make authentic classroom writing sound easy or even always possible. I teach 150 students each day and it is not possible to direct all student writing to a real audience or publish everything students write. But authenticity stays in the forefront as I have created my prompts and because it is remains an important goal, my ideas for authentic prompts continue to blossom. My students are writing more effectively, and when I read and respond to their essays I find the experience more interesting than tedious, and sometimes, blessedly, even compelling.

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Books

Link/Age:

Composing in the Online Classroom

by Joan Turnow

Logan, UT
Utah State University Press, 1997.

◆

Reviewed by

Paul Molinelli

Paul Molinelli has taught writing for nine years at both the high school and university levels and is currently a doctoral student in the Graduate School of Education at U.C. Berkeley. His interests include innovative uses of technology in language and literacy education.

I remember the first time I participated in an online computer chat. Watching typewritten responses instantly appear on my screen — writing that had originated on my brother-in-law's keyboard only milliseconds earlier in Tokyo, Japan — had an almost eerie, Ouija-board feeling to it. I recall thinking just how different this experience was — not quite writing, not quite speaking — and how in some ways even better than the long-distance telephone conversations it was replacing. It was certainly more fun than talking on the phone, and as an English teacher always on the prowl for new ways to engage my students, I was excited about the playfulness that such an environment invited.

In *Link/Age: Composing in the Online Classroom*, Joan Turnow captures the playful possibilities of this real-time, online medium as she reports on her semester-long study of one college writing classroom using networked computers. However, what she finds as a participant-observer in this predominantly online composition classroom concerns more than just the "playful possibilities" of employing networked computers. While addressing the potential of this medium to engage students in the enjoyment of word play, this book also speaks powerfully to all composition teachers who are interested in thinking about ways and *reasons* to harness these relatively new technologies in a response-based writing classroom.

Link/Age revolves around the story of Hugh Burns' English 309 course, "Writing, Thinking, and Learning." with eighteen seniors and one sophomore enrolled, the course itself met twice a week in the English Department Computer Lab at the University of Texas. Students and the instructor spent part of the time communicating with each other through a real-time networked computer system called LINC (Live Interactive Network Conversations), comparable to the now-ubiquitous chatroom or MUD (Multi-User Domain) available to every denizen of cyberspace. The rest of the time class members met face-to-face in the center of the computer room around a more "traditional" cluster of tables and chairs.

Burns designed the course to include two or three LINC sessions per each of the class texts (*Writing to Learn* by William Zinsser, *Time and the Art of Living* by Robert Grudin, and *Best American Essays, 1989*, edited by Geoffrey Wolff and Robert Atwan). These online discussions focused on various aspects of the texts, such as style or specific content, but, as the reader discovers, they also took many interesting and multi-purposed detours along the way. In addition to participating in these LINC sessions, students were expected to write a paper on each of these texts, various versions of which were to be posted by e-mail to all class members.

Turnow begins *Link/Age* with an interesting discussion about the relevance of an ever-emerging postmodern world view to traditional composition curricula, followed by a brief history of networked computers in education. This context is helpful in understanding her argument that these new communication tools are

> *embedded in a larger shift affecting the way we perceive and organize reality. In the field of composition, this is generally referred to as the shift from modernism to postmodernism — a new foregrounding of fragmentation along with a collapsing of coherence and of the autonomous individual.... While humanities disciplines tend to frame this shift as one from modernism to postmodernism, science disciplines frame it as one from a mechanistic and predictable Newtonian world view to a dynamic and unpredictable quantum world view.* (p. 3)

This "paradigm shift" is consistent with these new forms of electronic communication; the "fragmentation" of networked communication tends to decentralize authority and invite multiple perspectives. In such an environment, knowledge is seen as "dynamic" and socially constructed, not "prepackaged" and transmittable. Furthermore, this environment challenges boundaries — including the slippery boundary between speaking and writing.

But what really makes this book come alive for the teacher of writing is what these students in English 309 say and *do* with this electronic classroom space and how, with the guidance of an exceptionally capable instructor, they appropriate this networked writing environment for themselves while developing into a community of writers.

The first of several students we meet in this book is Lora. She admits to being self-conscious about her ability to write, and she readily shares her trepidation about venturing into this online arena when sending her first "obligatory" e-mail message to her instructor:

> *Wow, am I confused. Should I continue this adventure in computer chaos? This class was recommended to me by Kate Frost* [a former instructor]. *she felt like I had a lot to say, but didn't know how to say it. That's why I'm here. God help me! The people next to me are going so quickly. AHHHHHHHHH!*
>
> *Anyway, I'll continue now. I found out in my freshman year of college that I didn't know how to write a correct essay. What a discomforting thing to realize about yourself.... Especially when your desire is to be an English major. Eventually I would like to teach high school English. Are you scared for me or what? I'm hoping to better my writing with practice and help from you and the others in the class. Also, I'm a doof with computers, so I'm wanting to be enlightened by the computer world.* (p. 28)

In this and similar comments readily offered by students via e-mail and the LINC system, we're reminded of how so many young writers come to our classrooms consumed with a fair amount of writing angst. But now, in a nonthreatening way, this uneasiness is made public.

Burns faces another problem familiar enough to teachers who want to share authority in their classrooms. He worked to create a classroom environment where students could assume responsibility for their own learning. But (perhaps this should be no surprise) they were unaccustomed to this role. Burns' first assignment asked students to write e-mail to him about their initial experiences in class and their own goals in composition studies. Turnow notes that

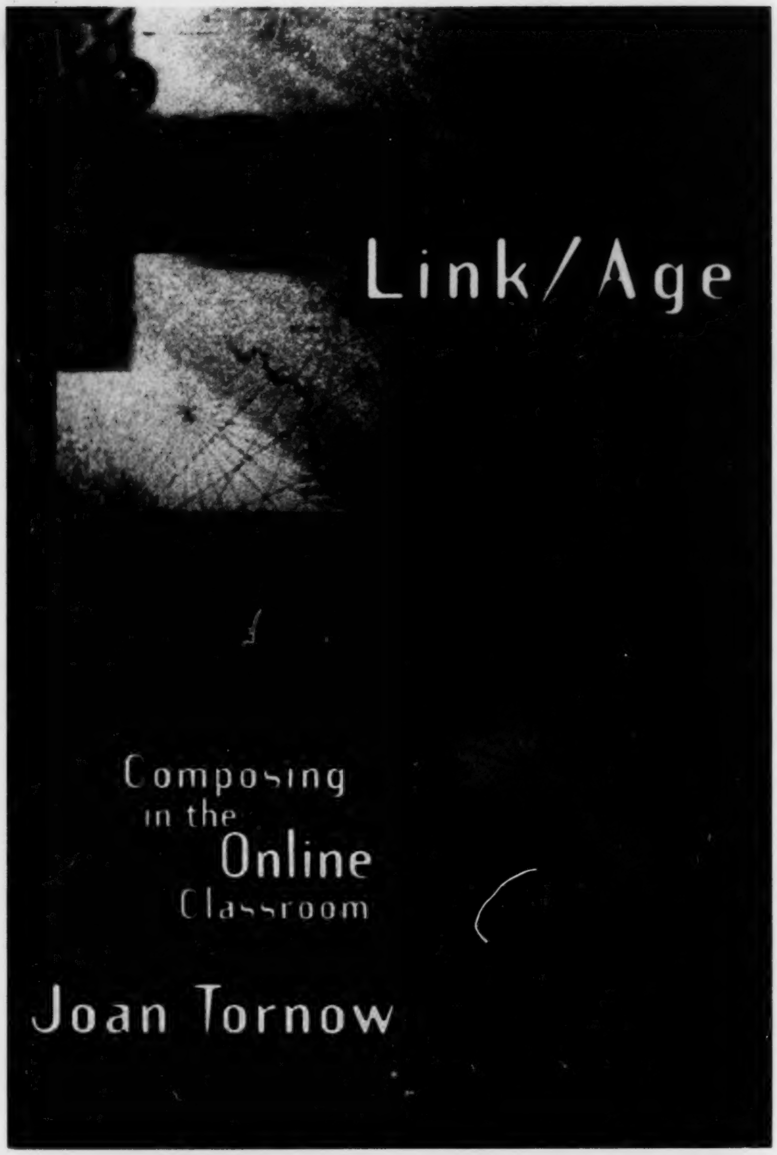
> *Most of the students in the class ... admitted they were not accustomed to defining or articulating their goals in composition studies ... that they were uncomfortable with too many choices."* (p. 27)

What's fascinating to watch, though, is just how well these students respond to the challenge of collaborating in this "virtual" classroom and in choosing the direction and content of these online conversations. Even during the first online discussion, students had little problem contributing to the dialogue, as Burns himself notes midway through the initial online discussion, "Listen to all these keystrokes today. Pretty weird for a 'writing' class to actually be writing. Amazzzzzing!" (p. 42)

Amazing, too, that all nineteen class members voluntarily participated in their very first online conference, resulting in a prodigious (if rather chaotic!) transcript in which students pursued various themes and purposes. Here William Zinsser's *Writing to Learn* touched a nerve, as students identified with Zinsser's consternation over the "pompous bureaucratic language of our times." This notion resonated with students "who, in their online talk, frequently expressed disdain for obscure academic prose" (p. 31). Sandra, for example, responded to the discussion by saying:

> Writing to Learn *gave me new hope! As a math major, the thought of having to write terrifies me. I always hated analyzing stories in English. I never knew what to write. Zinsser's approach to writing in one's own field makes a lot of sense. As Zinsser says, "Students will write far more willingly if they write about subjects that interest them and that they have an aptitude for."* (p. 39)

That writing should be a personally meaningful and thoughtful activity is a pervasive theme in *Link/Age*. Here, of course, the instructor's stance was critical. Turnow points out that Burns was aware, even before the class started, that "Old and rigid roles of 'student' and 'teacher' simply don't hold up in the networked environment," pointing out a line in his syllabus that read, "At the beginning, I'll seem like the teacher and you, the student. By the end, you should be a teacher too" (p. 81). Turnow notes that while Burns was the chief authority in the classroom, his "nonauthoritarian persona did seem to foster an informal atmosphere in which students, too, could experiment with various personae" (p. 81).



One of the students who clearly benefited from this atmosphere was David, an African American senior majoring in psychology, who admitted during an interview that in most of his college classes he had chosen to keep "a low profile — reading, listening, thinking, but not choosing to talk too much" (p. 108). During one LINC session regarding Zinsser's *Writing to Learn*, he wrote, "I think that the most important point that Zinsser makes is that riting [sic] can be an enjoyable and valuable learning experience" (p. 108). Up to this point, David had exercised his prerogative to re-read and edit his comments carefully before posting them on the LINC. Turnow notes the virtue of this new medium for a reluctant classroom participant like David, who at first was overly conscious of writing "mechanics" but whose

> *priorities were clearly on meaning now, and not on spelling; furthermore, he had noticed that many students made errors and that in synchronous online discussion, the cosmetics of writing were given short shrift … He later said that once he realized that online writing was more like talking, it was easier to participate.* (p. 108)

The power of these LINC sessions to invite participation is especially noteworthy, for it foregrounds the potential of this medium to break down barriers to classroom participation, while reminding us of the difficulty many students have entering a group discussion, afraid as they often are of having to "sound intellectual." Irene, an English major who "admitted that she found the relative anonymity of the LINC more comfortable than traditional class discussions," confesses that she rarely if ever spoke in her English classes:

> *I was terrified to speak. I guess I felt like I had nothing intelligent to say. Sometimes I thought maybe I would speak, but most of the things I say I'm emotionally attached to, so I'll lay low because I might have to defend what I say and there's a chance I might start crying in class.* (p. 59)

One reason students weren't made to feel defensive is that this online discussion environment also promotes tentativeness in both ideas and language. For example, students can play with writing conventions, often to interesting effects, relieving the pressure they often feel to compose perfect academic prose. This was true when sending e-mail to one another as well — even to their instructor. Turnow observes that, "If the students wrote in slang, Burns often responded in kind. If they experimented with writing conventions, such as dispensing with capitalization, he gave it a try, too" (p. 88). For example, Lora sent the following e-mail to Burns, eliciting his response to her proposed topic for the second class paper:

> *yo hugh. Pain and the art of living. What do you think? very broad, huh?...*

To this Burns responded:

> *yo lora depends on what happened on your [LINC] cover the positive side of pain too don't be just heavy hearted why am i not punctuating or capitalizing why why why ...* (pp. 88-89)

As the semester progressed, the fruits of such linguistic tentativeness, including the participation it fostered, turned this classroom into a community. Burns felt that establishing such community was crucial, modeling what Turnow calls "kind attention" in his thoughtful reading of student messages. She notes that

> *(h)is responses were always supportive, even when critical. Thus, he did not blatantly challenge, insult, or in any way model a confrontational style of relationship. His very style of support suggested a type of community that might be achieved online.* (p. 146)

Students in turn seemed to respond to this kind of modeling in their support of one another, expressions of which Turnow believes are much more frequent and public than in traditional classes she has observed. Not only did students call each other by name more frequently, they also made supportive comments such as "I agree" and "good point" regularly when responding to one another.

During one LINC session students helped each other brainstorm topics for their second paper on *Time and the Art of Living* by Robert Grudin. Partly as an exercise in imitating Grudin's somewhat random and "hypertextual" (or nonlinear) style, students were asked to pick a substitute for the word/concept "Time" in *Time and the Art of Living*. Each paper would ultimately consist of a series of paragraphs exploring aspects of their chosen topics. Following is a short sequence of three LINC comments by Holly, David, and Angela. Early in the LINC, Holly wrote:

> *My topic is Knowledge and the Art of Living, and I encourage and welcome any insight into this topic.*

David responded:

> *Have you ever heard the saying that a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing? Also I think that it is interesting how certain leaders in other countries, and probably in our own too, control people by keeping certain information out of their hands. just a thought.*

Angela then picked up on this message and carried it further:

> *Holly: This is kind of an aside to David's message about leaders of other countries. That brought to my mind George Orwell's 1984 where they had all knowledge of everyone. Nothing was privacy. There are some things that people shouldn't know. We debated in a gov. class one time about knowledge. Is it always good? For example, would we be better off without the knowledge of the H-bomb? HMMMMM.* (pp. 112-113)

In this climate, students were interested in helping one another by bringing to bear their own intertextual "tapestry" of background knowledge culled from previous readings, discussions, and experiences.

And while not all of these experiences may have been immediately relevant to the formal curriculum, they were certainly vital to the broader purposes of this writing course. One of the great virtues of this new medium is the way in which it fosters subconversations, examples of what Irving Goffman calls "underlife," those behaviors that help individuals carve out unique identities for themselves and express their desire to expand beyond circumscribed roles — in this case, their traditional school roles as "students." Here, for example, is some of the "off-task" discussion woven throughout a LINC discussion on Zinsser's *Writing to Learn* (numbers refer to when they occurred during the discussion):

> (19) **Todd:** *all we are is dust in the wind...*
>
> (21) **Tammy:** *Todd: Like sands through the hourglass so are the days of our lives*
>
> (29) **Tim:** *Todd: you type therefore you are...*
>
> (50) **Todd:** *to tim and tammy: "We're just two lost souls swimming in a fish bowl, year after year, running over the same old ground, what have we found, the same old fears..."*
>
> (51) **Josh:** *Tammy: Are you a DAYS fan?*
>
> (56) **Tammy:** *Josh: Of course!!! Todd: What drugs are you on? Where do you come up with this stuff?*
>
> (64) **Todd:** *tammy: don't you listen to p. floyd? You know, "we don't need no educatin, we don't need no thought control" that kind of stuff*
>
> (67) **Josh:** *In defense of Todd, you can't beat Pink Floyd*
>
> (72) **Tammy:** *O.K. guys. Whatever you say. I'm not really into p. floyd but I'll take your word for it.*
>
> (79) **Sharon:** *Todd: You seem to have many philosophical ideas. Have you by any chance seen "Bill and Ted's excellent adventure" and are you an adament follower of Days of Our Lives?"* (p.98)

Turnow reminds us that, these comments were interspersed among nearly eighty messages, noting that students can participate in "underlife" discourse without losing a single word of the mainstream discussion. She observes how the dynamics of classroom dialogue shift when underlife conversations are allowed to become public:

> *Students change the scope of what is being shared, thought about, and written about. Some teachers report that they find the openness and self-revelation refreshing. It helps them see their students as complex individuals, not simply students. Further, it provides a window into the students' true feelings about the curriculum. Burns appreciated these underlife features of student dialogue.* (p. 100)

In the end, Turnow leaves us with the kind of irony any English teacher can appreciate. In an age where many fear the dehumanizing potential of machines to alienate and isolate, here they function to do just the opposite. Furthermore, the "Ouija-board" magic my brother-in-law and I enjoyed during our first overseas online exchange was really no magic at all; on some level, we each probably knew this was simply a new place where the language arts were very much alive. While reminding us of this, *Link/Age* affirms what we already know about good teaching, and how these modern electronic tools can be harnessed to achieve many important pedagogical ends: inviting student ownership of the curriculum, fostering community and dialogue, providing real audiences, and inspiring continuous revision.

And while such computer resources remain far from the norm in most schools, they are becoming standard classroom tools. Turnow's book helps us think about the ways the new communication "spaces" they create can be used to achieve multiple purposes in the writing classroom. *Link/Age* also reminds us that what it means to be "literate" is a slippery and ever-evolving construct, always defined by our own "ways with words" — and the means we use for sharing them.

Surfing the Net:

A Writing Workshop for Middle School

Technology

by

JEAN BOREEN

◆

Jean Boreen is an assistant professor in the English department at Northern Arizona University and works with the Northern Arizona Writing Project.

Early in my first year of teaching 8th grade, I had my first experience and my first disaster with students in a computer lab. I had anticipated the experience, if not the disaster, since college, when I had become an advocate of computers to aid the writing process. Now, I was preparing my students for the big event: drafting and revising a process paper in the computer lab. I knew what I thought the students needed to know. I taught them about the cut and paste commands necessary for revision and about the thesaurus and spell check as aids to fine tuning. And these were just for starters. I talked a lot and students busily took notes.

In most classes, five or six out of 22-25 students had previously worked in the computer lab, and I suggested to them that they could be "co-experts" with me, helping the less technologically-informed students. Flooded with feelings of good will towards both my students and the computer lab, I enthusiastically set them working on their drafts. And then came Monday.

This first encounter with the computer lab was a greater learning experience for teacher than students; nothing worked quite as planned. First, although the majority of students had their first draft written, some had never typed before, and the hunt-peck method had to suffice; that meant that the typing-impaired would probably not have as much time to revise as the typing-proficient. Secondly, most of my lecture on computer commands could just as well have been given in Latin for all the sense these directions made to the students. Thirdly, many of the self-proclaimed computer experts didn't know quite as much as they had suggested, and too often, their eagerly offered help resulted in their classmates losing sections of their drafts. Finally, our twenty-five new Apple computers were not always up and running; we could count on at least three "freeze ups" every class period. The results? For fifty fifty-five minute class periods I ran maniacally from child to child, advising, providing "technical assistance," offering encouragement, all the time feeling frustrated and inadequate.

Through trial and error over the next few years, I became more adept at preparing students for the lab writing experience, but the frustration of this first experience made me realize how little training I had been given as a preservice teacher to prepare me for the realities of technology in the classroom. Now as an instructor responsible for teacher preparation, I want my students to be ready for work in the computer labs which will support their teaching.

Rationale Behind "Surfin' the Net: A Writing Workshop for Kids"

"Surfing the Net: A Writing Workshop for Kids" was an English Education/Northern Arizona Writing Project (NAWP) course offered at Northern Arizona University during a five week session in Summer, 1996. The thinking behind the course was very straightforward: I wanted to give my university students the opportunity to work one-on-one with a group of eighth grade students in a computer writing lab. For the middle school students (who would attend class the middle three weeks of the five week session) there would be the opportunity to spend one week researching topics off the Internet before turning their attention to the writing process. For the university students, this would be a way to consider how computer technology functions in conjunction with the writing process in "real" classrooms.

The course was highly compacted. We set out to accomplish a great deal in three weeks. The middle-school students would only be with us for twelve days, for one hour and fifteen minutes each day, and one of those days would be devoted to the authors' publishing party. That meant that our young authors had to pre-write, draft, peer conference, revise, edit and publish in only eleven days. And while most of the adult students — a combination of university students and local teachers who were interested in finding out more about Internet use in the classroom — had taken a mini-institute on the writing process through the NAWP, there were some students from areas other than English who had little or no experience with writing, much less teaching writing, but who were curious about research using the Internet.

What I would like to share are the experiences of the twenty middle school students, the twenty adult students, and me as we integrated computer technology into the writing process.

Preparing the University Students

> *After class today, I am extremely anxious/nervous about what we are going to do in here. I am barely familiar with the Internet and computers in general; how am I going to be the "expert" for a child?! … Maybe my student will be familiar with the Net and can teach me a thing or two.* Brooke (University student)

Like Brooke, most of the university students had never "surfed the 'Net" and were very unclear as to what is offered on the World Wide Web. Through modeling — using a computer hookup to a television at the front of the room — the university students and I previewed much of the work we would be doing with the middle school students. For example, the students learned how to direct key searches. I knew that many of the middle school students would express an interest in "sports" or "animals" or other topics that needed to be focused by a key search. As my university students began looking for information on anything from wedding dresses to the screen return of "Star Wars," they also began experiencing the major problem their middle school students would soon face: screen freeze-up.

These "freeze-ups" were typically brought about by all twenty computers trying to access the Internet at the same time. When most of the middle school students had finished researching on the Internet and were engaged in word-processing, screen freeze ups declined. During the average hour and fifteen minutes we spent daily on the twenty computers available in the lab, we typically saw five to seven computers freeze a day, though rarely the same computers. Rebooting the computer, of course, was our only option for getting back to work, but it also meant that students lost information that they often had had difficulty finding in the first place. As I explained to my vexed students, though, it was necessary for them to experience these computer hassles so that they would know how to handle them with their own middle-school students.

I also wanted my university students to be aware of the multitude of sites — both for instruction and entertainment — that are available on the Net. My first assignment for them was to find five Internet addresses they thought might be useful when working with middle school students. At the same time, as I was providing them with Internet addresses connected to education/ English/ Language Arts in general — The Folger Shakespeare Theatre, The Smithsonian, The National Council of Teachers of English, The Franklin Institute — they were finding such important listings as "Hercules: The Legendary Journeys," ESPN's "Sportsline," and "Star Wars."

But when the middle school students arrived, they had no trouble finding sites related to their special

118

interests without much help from the teachers. The middle schoolers would begin with a "fun" topic like a movie or a sports figure and turn to an appropriate web site for information. As the students found more than they had originally thought they would, the issues they considered became more complicated.

Sites for the Ultimate Fan

Fourth grader Danielle was an avid basketball fan; when she and her NAU teacher Janeen found the Chicago Bulls web site, Danielle knew that she wanted to "do" something with player Scottie Pippen but had no real sense of the direction in which she should go with her project. Because the Bulls were in the midst of the NBA championship, Danielle was able to get updates after each game. Many of the Bulls provided comments about their own playing, and Danielle used Pippen's comments to focus her writing project: she decided she would write Scottie Pippen a letter asking some of the questions that she felt he wasn't responding to on the web site. Looking carefully at the questions other players were being asked, Danielle developed her own set and wrote a business letter to Pippen asking for answers to these questions.

Seeking Nirvana

However, some university students found that the wealth of information, pictures, and interactive possibilities on the Internet created distractions. Like those people we hear about in the news who spend every waking hour glued to their computer screens, some of our middle school students became obsessed with the music, graphics, and pictures connected to their topics. For example, when 8th grade student, Jeff, became aware of the massive variety of pictures of his favorite group, Nirvana; his interest in writing faltered. As his NAU instructor, Taylor, noted:

> *My expectations have definitely changed since before we started with our students. Today, all Jeff wanted to do was look at pictures of Nirvana which took the majority of our time. In a class with 25 kids who are doing the same thing, I would have to keep them all on track. I think I would allow them to find pictures, but encourage that as a reward after the main information was gathered.*

The Trouble with Weimaraners, or "How Do You Spell the Name of This Dog?"

Brooke, another NAU student, struggled with a 4th grade student named Emily. From the first moment of class, Emily knew she wanted to write a poem that drew on information about her favorite breed of dog: the weimaraner. Brooke thought she would have an easy time with this very focused author. This was not the case. Brooke writes:

> *After an hour of working, Emily decided that she was finished with the 'Net. She absolutely would not work any longer on finding information for her poem. I could understand her frustrations because first, we had a terrible time trying to find the spelling of "weimeraner" — computer labs still need dictionaries — and the computer would not give us a break on even close spellings! Second, she couldn't access some of the sites we did find and some others listed the names and addresses of weimaraner breeders and other not particularly fascinating topics. So I made my first teacher-decision. I told her that she could play a game called Amazon Trail for the rest of class. And we did the same thing the next two days until I finally told her that we had deadlines and she must finish her piece before playing games. This experience really opened my eyes to kids' attention spans, and what makes or breaks them as far as keeping them interested in their research.*

Brooke's failure to access the sites her student wanted was a problem shared by other teachers, and one teachers would need to work with and around when they were in their own classrooms. Unfortunately, as many of us who search the 'Net have found, web sites are not always up-to-date and sites that are available one month may have disappeared by the next. In view of this, teachers may find it useful to become more knowledgeable about their students' most often accessed web sites, checking them periodically and letting students know if the sites are still around. The reality, though, is that this can be a very time-consuming task, and teachers need to remind students that a disappearing site may be one of the downsides to working the Internet.

"Murder of a Mouse" ... in More Ways Than One

Another potential problem with Internet research is how to safeguard against what students may find as they explore. Many of us are aware of media reports concerning pornographic materials on the Internet. An unsuspecting person may easily stumble onto an inappropriate site. As I was developing the course, my father-in-law told me about an Internet search he had been conducting on Ford trucks; instead of the

Ford logo he expected, what appeared instead on the screen was a stripper named Fannie Ford who offered a preview of her routine.

Taking a proactive approach, I sent out a "Student's Rights and Responsibilities when Using the Internet" form that had to be read, reviewed and signed by both the students and their parents. The form stated that there was a possibility that a student could find inappropriate material during her research, but I verbally assured parents that this possibility was remote because of the one-on-one nature of the course. Ha. Marcia writes:

> *My student Sherri, had been typing in "mouse" all morning and we were getting pictures and all sorts of information about mice. Then she somehow hit the "c" instead of the "m" and we had the word "couse," a word that does not appear in my dictionary, and all of a sudden, the screen filled with a couple engaged in a live action sex show. I hit "Enter" and they disappeared. I don't think Sherri saw this performance, but I was glad I was right there and moved quickly enough to put out the fire. It's not something I would want my child finding.*

Obviously, no matter how closely teachers monitor their students' work, there is no way to guarantee that students will not find inappropriate materials on the Internet, whether by design or by accident, unless the teacher or her school systems implements a system by which sites are downloaded and okayed by teachers before the student is given access to the site. This again, however, implies that the teacher has more time than she probably really has to go through and check all of the sites in question.

By the end of the second week of our five week course, all of my students, university and middle school, were essentially finished with the research/Internet aspect of the class. As they moved on to the writing process phase of the course, we had to rethink the notion of teacher responsibility to students as it connects to word processing.

Drafting Using Internet Research

The next week found the student groups moving to the drafting stage of the writing process. The most difficult aspect of this shift for both me and the university students was that we expected our middle school students to want to write long pieces integrating their ideas and what they had found on the Internet. The reality for this combination of 4th through 7th grade students was that they were typically satisfied with a one-page draft of whatever they were creating. Emily wrote a twelve line poem about her weimeraner and deemed it "perfect;" another youngster decided that a travelogue showing a Star Wars-like journey he would like to take with a line of description under each picture would "be enough." Two of the older students were willing to write 2-3 pages, but Jeff, our Nirvana fan, felt that a dated timeline would more than suffice for his writing project. Norman, who was supervising the travelogue creator, commented:

> *No matter what I suggested, he didn't want to pursue a project that had more writing in it. Being the "veteran" teacher I am, I folded, let him cop out of the writing, and allowed him to go back to the Internet. This really frustrated me because I felt I had failed to get this kid excited about writing, which to me was the point of the class.*
>
> *So I sat Jack down and told him that we needed some literature to put in the book we would be publishing. I suggested a story about the collage he was putting together. He wasn't too excited until I told him that once he finished we could find some more "cool" sites on the 'Net. Jack became a writing machine. He combined ideas — being an action hero, going on an intergalactic journey — and subjects — Ken Griffey, baseball — that he liked and had found Internet sites about and wrote this great piece of fiction. And I think* he *was surprised at how well it turned out because he was grinning ear to ear and making everyone read his story. That day I had a role in getting a student excited about something he did. That was the day I knew I had the potential to be a good teacher.*

Experiences like Norman's were fairly typical of the university students who had never really taught beyond a practicum situation; however, the journals indicate that their enthusiasm was tempered by the understanding that when they were dealing with 25 students in one class, creating these special moments with students would take longer and involve more frustration on the part of both teacher and student because the teacher would not have 30 minutes to sit and interact with each student on a regular basis.

My university students also found that during this time that many of their middle school students were, as one put it "keyboard illiterate." While some of the young writers had keyboarding experience from working on their own home computers, many used the hunt-and-peck method. This, of course, was the same experience I had had with my eighth graders some years before. The students and I worked out some options. Some of the university students offered to type as their students dictated the story/letter, but they let the middle-school students know that they would be in charge of proofreading and making their own changes on the computer. Other teacher-student pairs stayed after class, giving the young author more time to compose. A third group of teachers encouraged their students to hand write their drafts in class. Then the teachers took the drafts and typed the pieces out on their own time. Again (am I sounding like a broken record?), the university students realized that this was a luxury made possible because each was working with only one student.

Revising With the Computer

As we had limited time to work with our middle school students, all stages of the composing process were more abbreviated than any of us, with the possible exception of the middle school students, would have liked. However, because the university students had such strong feelings about the importance of revising, they worked hard to make sure that we had time for this part of the process.

In teams, the university students organized a revising day. They modeled revising situations they felt would be most helpful. They shared drafts with the others in the group and asked for revision suggestions. They made up conferencing sheets or encouraged student to make written comments on drafts. In any case, the university students often found that their young charges did not take this stage of writing as seriously as their teachers did, and more often than not, the middle school students did not take other's suggestions seriously, often refusing to change their writing unless their NAU teacher told them they had to. More than once I heard a student comment to her university instructor, "Remember, we changed this one other time; why do we have to do this again?" Like many of us who compose at the computer, a number of the middle-school students understood that revising using computers is not always a separate step from the drafting process. Many of them *had* made changes along the way, either because of their own sense of what sounded "correct" as they were writing or because their teacher had offered a suggestion that the student decided to embrace. Most of my NAU students have the same attitude about revising at the computer, but ignored their own writing instincts because of what they considered their "teacherly" duty: to break down the writing process into clearly articulated parts that their students understand and are able to follow. The university students came also to understand that explaining the difference between revision and proofreading was no simple task. As novice teacher Justin notes:

> *Teaching the concepts of writing is much harder than it seems. Trying to help Mike understand the processes of revision and analyzing mistakes was difficult. Some of the ideas he understood and some he didn't care about. He felt that his initial piece was in final form and only needed punctuation corrections. I tried to show him that just making punctuation changes is not enough and that revision is the most important part of writing. He struggled, but by the end of our time together, I felt that he understood that his second draft should be as important as his rough draft.*

Publishing on the Computer

I have always believed in publishing student work. In this class we pulled together a booklet of student writing to be shared with classmates, families and friends at a class meeting.

For the majority of the teacher-student teams, preparing for the publishing stage was hectic. There was one last editing check. There was the return to the Internet to gather ideas for drawings they could create to correspond with the texts. They also had to decide how to present their texts, both in the booklet and for the authors' party. They scanned; they cut and pasted, all the time considering the aesthetics of text presentation. One student created a newspaper. Another circled a drawing with text. Some created colorful posters that correlated with the writing they would read aloud. The computers offered an outlet for student creativity that went beyond the simple word processing aspect most of us take for granted.

Final Reflections

In this final section, I would like to consider what conclusions we can draw for teachers who are trying to integrate the writing process and technology in their own classrooms and discuss what those of us who work with the future teachers need to implement in our own classes.

What the Students Learned about Teaching on the Internet

Jenna, who had recently finished her student teaching experience, noted that she had had little opportunity to work in the computer lab at her school, even though there had been a lab available.

> *What I wanted to see in this class, was if real students could work in a computer lab environment. I wasn't disappointed. The majority of the kids took off into computer world and produced some great work. I also learned that some kids are completely distracted by it. Overall, I am of the opinion that students today have to have some experience with technology, even if it is only for three days, or three weeks at a time. It is a requirement in today's society that one be familiar with the ways of cranky computers, and any exposure could be beneficial. Of course, if the exposure can produce some meaningful, valuable work that a student takes responsibility for and is proud of, so much the better.*

In general these beginning teachers saw this class as a way of avoiding the predictable traps when computers become available in a school. The idea of technology in the classroom is a glamorous one, but if teachers lack the substantive knowledge to support the computer use, the computers quickly lose their shine and sit unused in the back of the classroom or become game terminals that serve as reward stations for students who finish their work quickly. Most students in my class now had confidence in their ability to motivate student interest in computer use. Although I had one student admit that she still might not encourage student computer use because she was not sure if she could handle the "frenzy that would probably occur as I'm trying to help twenty-five students at one time."

The addition of the Internet component adds possibilities and frustrations to the pre-writing and drafting stages of the writing process. The potential for motivating excitement about conducting research is enormous because of the immediacy of the information. Students who have grown up with computers in their homes and classrooms embrace with ease their computer work; they have little fear of the technology and often find it easier to pull information from the Net than from a card catalog or *Reader's Guide*.

Nevertheless, the frustration factor is a real one. Web sites come and go with a frequency that leave students questioning how to find information. Screens freeze-up and computers break down when multiple computers are run through one server. However, computers are now front and center in most school districts. Thus teachers need to continue to look for opportunities to connect computer technology with all aspects of classroom experience. Using the Internet is one way of accomplishing this goal.

What I Learned About Teaching Future Teachers

Most of us who work in university education programs know the importance of getting our students out into classrooms long before student teaching. In addition to sophomore or junior year practicums, many universities have set up tutoring sessions between education students and students in local schools; the writing course offered through the Northern Arizona Writing Project (NAWP), for instance, sends students out for a minimum of twelve hours in classrooms of teachers who have completed an NAWP institute.

But the experiences the students had in the "Surf the 'Net" course provided opportunities for a teacher in training to work one-on-one with a student involved in the writing process, an experience not possible in large group practicum situations or during tutoring opportunities where the focus is often on remediation of student errors. While this is an artificial experience in the sense that as teachers we are rarely lucky enough to have the time to work one-on-one as the students in this course did, my students were able to realize some of the challenges they would face in the classroom. They all learned to adapt and be flexible, making adjustments appropriate to the child with whom they were working. And as Brooke summarized in her final reflection for the course:

> *Yes, I was extremely frustrated at times and I wanted to say things to Emily like "concentrate, do your work, no you cannot play the Amazon Trail game today." But I held myself in check because I wanted her to develop an interest in the computer and Internet and in the different ways she could learn to write. I think I accomplished those goals with her even as I became much more comfortable with my teaching future. I had never been responsible for teaching someone by myself. Today, I know that I can meet the challenges of teaching using a variety of instructional tools and exceed my own expectations.*

After several weeks "Surfing the Net" Brooke is able to make this claim with greater justified confidence, than I was able to entering that computer lab with my eighth graders not so many years ago.

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Fall 1997

Volume 19, Number 4

Using Kids' Books To Teach About Words

(See Page 22)

CONTENTS

WRITING FROM THE FRINGE

The Writing Process Goes to San Quentin 1
JANE JUSKA

Book Excerpt: Until We Are Strong Together 6
CAROLINE E. HELLER

Should Shay Be Squelched?
Striking a Balance Between Discipline and Creativity 12
STACY LARSON

WORD WEALTH

Sound and Sense:
Grammar, Poetry and Creative Language 16
RAY SKJELBRED

Literature as Language:
Using Kids' Books to Teach About Words 22
CHRISTINE FACCIOLLI

Annotated Bibliography for
Kids and Teachers Who Love Words 30
CHRISTINE FACCIOLLI

WRESTLING WITH THE PROCESS

Pruning Too Early:
The Thorny Issue of Grading Student Writing 34
STEPHANIE WILDER

Cover photo &
photo on p. 37 by
ELIZABETH CREWS

Illustrations:

P. 23, from *Pigs
from A to Z* by
ARTHUR GEISERT;

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P. 27 from *Inner
Chimes: Poems on
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The Writing Process Goes to San Quentin

by

JANE JUSKA

◆

San Quentin Prison looms over San Francisco Bay. It offers one of the world's most beautiful views and houses 6,000 men, among them the world's most violent offenders, including those on California's Death Row. A little west of Death Row is my classroom building. Downstairs, in Room 2, for three hours every Wednesday night, I meet 75 students who are serving life sentences and who have elected to take my course, English 101: Reading and Writing Fiction.

PREWRITING: "A so-called prewriting activity may simply be another activity done for its own sake — a discussion, improvisation, ..." — James Moffett in *Active Voice*

Rasheed and Max are yelling at each other across what Max has named our "Circle of Kings Plus One." "You can't have empathy with my situation," shouts Max for the third time. He pushes his glasses back up to the bridge of his nose where they tilt, smudged and crazily askew. "I can!" yells back Rasheed, "That's what I been telling you!" Rasheed stretches his heavily-muscled upper body out from his chair, so does Max, and the fingers they point at each other look like God's and Adam's on Michelangelo's ceiling.

Where is my whistle. The prison authorities directed me to wear a whistle around my neck at all times. Either that or carry the beeper they offered to lend me. "But be careful," they warned. "This is extremely sensitive..." — the guard held the beeper aloft — " if it goes off, we go on lockdown with guns out." So I don't carry a beeper, and the whistle I bought to abide by the rules is somewhere not around my neck. This is the first time in the eight weeks I have met with my class that I have been nervous, though not for my own safety. I introduced the word "empathy"' because I wanted my students to establish characters in their writing with whom the reader would have it. Look where it led.

The argument stems from the fact that Max is doing life without a date. Rasheed is serving 15 to life, which means a possibility of parole after 15 years. "If a person's got no date," explains Max, "nobody can understand." "I can," insists Rasheed, and thus it goes.

The other students, some with dates, most without, listen respectfully. Dwinell winks at me in silent reassurance. I forget about my whistle.

L.C. says in his elegant baritone, "Listen, you all, I'm going to tell you a story." We turn to him. "Since, let me remind you," he smiles, "that's what we're here for."

We smile back. Max and Rasheed, too, though not at each other. L.C. soothes us, as he has before, with the darkness of his lilt: "When I was a little boy, I saw a certain film time and time again. Scared me half to death, don't know why. It was called 'The Onion Field Killer.' In case you don't know, it's about this guy who goes berserk and kills a cop; they called him the onion field killer because that's where it happened. Or so I have been led to believe." Am I the only one in here, I wonder, who knows that Max is in for murder? Rasheed knows, I'll bet. "When I grew up, one of the places I got myself into was Folsom Prison, y'all know where that is. I was a young man then." L.C. has relaxed in his chair, his long legs stretched out before him, hands locked behind his head. He looks above our heads, staring at a time and space beyond the walls of our classroom. He is enjoying himself. He says, "One of the first nights I was there, come time to see a film. And guess what that film was. Yes, indeed, it was 'The Onion Field.' And I was sitting there watching and remembering when suddenly the guy next to me, an older guy he was, says, 'That's me.' I looked around and he's pointing at the screen. It was the Onion Field killer himself."

What a story! We are entranced, we are impressed. Now comes the lesson. L.C. unfolds his hands, returns to a more formal position in his chair, and looks around the circle at us. "What I want to say is I wasn't terrified of this fella. We both were serving life sentences. And I could go along with him. I believe that's what you call 'empathy.'"

We are quiet for a moment. Then Max says, "Yeah, I still say..." Hectar, who rarely speaks in class, raises his hand and says, "Can we go on now?"

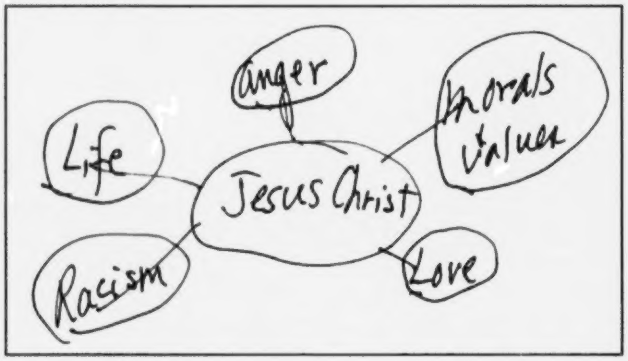
I remember where my whistle is: in my briefcase which sits in the corner of the classroom, outside our circle where it belongs.

Stan stays after class which means he will miss showers. He tells me that an inmate, in here 22 years, asked him, "Tell me what it feels like to pet a dog." Stan tried to describe his own dog's coat, the dog he hasn't seen for seven years. "What does a dog's bark sound like?" the man asked. Stan barked. Still another inmate wanted Stan to tell him how the rapid transit works. He's seen it on TV but has been in longer than the rapid transit's been alive. Stan did all this. Is this empathy, he wants to know.

Two men on Death Row want to sign up for more than one course. Most inmates will take only one class since they work in the prison forty hours a week. Those on the Row, exempt from prison work, will sign up for more. One says, "I want a degree and I don't have all that much time." Because of the unusual circumstances, I give them a little test:

Writing Prompt: Write about someone who had a strong influence in your life.

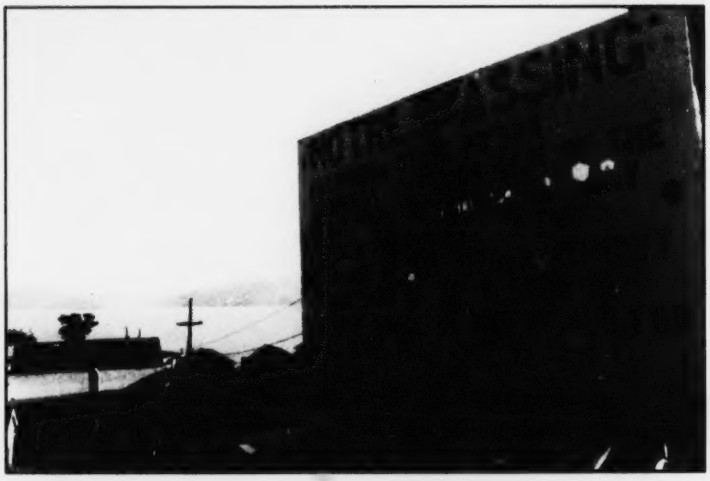
One response:



And another:

I guess I would have to say it's my mom who influenced me the most. At the age of three, she taught me *to get the candy out of the gumball machine. At five, I could open any hotel door with a credit card. I guess if it wasn't for my mom, I wouldn't be where I am today.*

Both passed the test.



Most of my students have been in prison longer than the writing process has been in town, so early on in the course I give the presentation I have given so many times in so many institutions: "An Introduction to the Writing Process." I make a big noise about revision, about how Less Is More, Slow is Fast. They listen politely; they even take notes, and at the end Thomas says, "I know this story I want to write has to have people talking; otherwise, it isn't a story. But there's something about those marks (he holds up his hands and curls the first two fingers of each hand) that I never learned. I'm not writing any story until I know what to do about those marks." He crosses his arms over his chest and narrows his eyes into what passes for a belligerent stare. Correctness comes first for these men. It is what they failed to learn in school; not following the rules has got them into trouble. "Gimme some rules!" Thomas demands. "Coach me!"

WRITING: "Members of a *writing workshop* may come together only for one session ... or they may stay together for weeks or months ane enjoy the benefits of increasing trust and familiarity."— Moffett, p. 24.

With or without rules, they are fluent, though they don't know it. Once I have convinced them that writing is not about spelling and punctuation — that we can worry about that down the line — then their favorite part of the class, they will tell me in their end-of-semester course evaluation, is when I say "Let's write." Then we are all quiet for ten or fifteen minutes. And afterwards, just about everybody reads. The prompts they like best are ones I, and eventually they, make up on the spot; they go like this: "Give me a color." "Red." "Give me a body part." "Teeth." "Give me some weather." "Thunder." "Let's write." Sometimes, we write from what John Gardner tells us: "Write a dialogue in which each of the two characters has a secret. Do not reveal the secret but make the reader intuit it." Intuit becomes a favorite word. But this John Gardner stuff is really hard, we agree, so we take it "home," and work on it. Is that revision, I wonder.

RESPONSE: "After a writer has done some version of her composition or begun to put together some material she has collected, it's often helpful to get advance audience reactions while changes can still be made." —Moffett, p. 19

Donald, a former Oakland cop, sits way over there, unwilling to join us in anything let alone a response group. No amount of encouragement from me would budge him. Eventually, after a few of the other students motion him out of his corner, he joins our circle and writes about his experiences with the Black Panthers. ("Donald, this is supposed to be a story, not a police report," I tell him to no avail. The final draft, complete with dialogue, interior monologue, and figurative language, still sounds like a police report: "It was alleged that night had fallen..."). Although I demonstrate and talk about the value of writing groups, and though the students get into them once in a while, neither Donald nor any of the others are convinced that their writing might benefit from peer response, if that's what this is. No, the response that matters is the teacher's. Conferencing is big.

We sit behind my desk. Each student in his turn pulls his chair close to mine, and I become aware of the powerful smell of men in prison. It is dark and musty and enormously sad. Though we sit close together, neither our knees nor our shoulders, nor even our fingers touch. Yet this is one of the most intimate experiences of my life.

Max has written the following and brought it to conference:

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

> *Snakelike brown muddy water dribbling down, the magical melting chocolate river, you see the saint get ducked, comes up anew in funk. Sweet brown sugar residue still in the corner of the mind like the Python leaving the scene on full. The bridge was taken long ago, hypnotized, intoxicated, now victimized without bail.*

I am impressed and say so. "This is a prose poem." "Yeah?" he says. "Is that good?" "Yes," I say, "but I wonder what it's about. Do you think, when you revise, you could ...." Mike's face falls and he looks at me through his glasses smudged and crooked on his nose. "It's my mind, man! It's my mind on heroin!" He wipes his sleeve across his nose: "And it could happen again! Don't you get it?" I do, so I shut up.

Stan wants to show me a story he's working on in which the main character is getting ready to leave for the golf course. He describes his sleeping wife with whom he has made long-night's love. "She lies there not moving, pale, slender, her breasts twin globes," etc., etc. I ask, "Stan, is she alive?" "Oh, yes," he assures me. "And then just after that the cops dropped out of nowhere and slapped the cuffs on me. The next thing I know I'm standing in front of the judge for sentencing." "Wow," I say, and shut up again.

REVISION: "All writing has to be an edited and revised version of the inner speech someone produces at a particular moment under the influence of random or controlled circumstances." — Moffett, p. 27

Victor begs me, "Please, Professor, fix my verbs." Do I say, "Go back to your group?" No. Besides, the groups seem to have dissolved right while I was fixing Homer's verbs. One night, Tim tells me, "I been reading my writing to my cellmate. He likes it and all, but thinks it's kind of long. What do you think?" I think he's got a smart cellmate and I tell Tim so. L.C. adds, "I find that since I have been discussing my writing, I have more to talk about with other folks. My conversation is much more interesting."

PUBLICATION: "...a cardinal rule is, 'Put writing to some realistic use after it is done, and make clear in advance of writing what purpose and audience are.'" — Moffett, p. 23

I am insistent on two requirements; in the syllabus I hand out the first night of class, I have written: 1) At the end of this course, you will submit to me and to your classmates a portfolio of your work, complete with drafts and cover letters. 2) You will submit at least one of your pieces to a newspaper, magazine, or journal for publication. When a few students murmur that they have no typewriters, no stamps, no envelopes (no confidence, I would add), I do not relent. "We're doing this," I say, nodding grimly. "You tell 'em, Professor," says Kareem.

Tom has cleaned out his prison account (his life savings) and sent away for an electronic typewriter... so "I won't lose my hard-earned writing skills."

It's a nightmare. Prisoners are not allowed to buy stamps. The prison must see and pass on everything that is sent out from the prison. Those are the rules. Add to the rules the fact that they are paid 14 cents an hour for their work and so I pay considerable money for the materials necessary to uphold my dictum. Then there is the matter of where to send their stuff. I buy *Writers' Market*. Victor gets increasingly anxious over completing the requirements, "Here I am doing time, and I haven't got any." It's O.K., they're going to do it. And they do, every last one of them. The last night of class looks like this:

We are enjoying ourselves. Gino and Jack write furiously; so does Tui. Bob and Tom and Jonas and Donald exchange portfolios, bend into them, read quickly and write their remarks on Post-its. Occasionally they laugh, tease each other. "I couldn't get over you, man," Jonas teases Tom. "There you are in your cell banging away on your new typewriter, and there's no paper in it!" What has happened is that Tom has cleaned out his prison account (his life savings) and sent away for an electronic typewriter. He explains to me that the typewriter is necessary so "I won't lose my hard-earned writing skills." I nod and smile and return to my own writing. Every once in a while, someone motions me over. Jack wants to be sure he puts the address in the right spot on the envelope. "Where," he says, "show me exactly where." I draw a square on the envelope. "OK, thanks." The sun has begun to go down behind the wall-sized, multi-paned window. In the winter the radiator against this wall bangs and hisses throughout class. This spring the sun has beaten its way onto our heads and into our eyes so that sometimes, until evening comes on, we find ourselves huddled together in the corner of the room the sun has yet to scorch. Now it is cool and quiet. Near the end of class, as people make ready to leave, I say almost to myself, "I always feel better after this class." Gino's smile breaks across his face. "Me, too," he says. "By the end, I always feel good." He hands me his portfolio. "You know, I took this class because I thought it would be fun. And it was, but the work! You worked us hard! Whew!" and he wipes his hand across his brow. As they file out of class, we shake hands, all my prisoners and I, and they say nice things. "What I could say about you," says Tim , "boy, you'd feel like a queen." (Later, at the end-of-the year ceremony he does and I do.) Smiles all around.

We will miss each other. We will miss the quiet concentration on reading and writing and talking that takes them (and in a sense me) far away from the night that descends on us in the yard as we leave the classroom. We will miss the way we like each other. Max asks, "Do you think we've grown as a class? You know, like a unit?" Yes, I do. "We get along good, don't we," says Gino. Yes, we do.

POST-WRITING: "The benefits will transfer to future writing." —Moffett, p. 24

Teaching in prison gets turned all around. Not just the writing process, but every expectation. I expected that surely, unlike high school, absences and tardies would not exist; my students would all be in class; where else could they go? Turns out, they can go lots of places, like the hole, which is where I am told Hectar is, "Don't expect him back anytime soon." And the teacher's ideas of what teaching is about get shaken up until Lord knows they could drop right out of you. To wit: I come armed with my Pollyanna smile and 30 years of practicing homilies in the classroom. *The truth shall make you free. Knowledge is power. Writing is power. Writing can give you knowledge. And power. And freedom.* I said them over and over to myself and to my high school kids. Freedom for my convicts would be freedom from San Quentin, so during my first few weeks of teaching there, I revise my thinking to read: *Knowledge is powerful. It can stir one up; it can make a whirlwind inside the head, a windmill in the gut.* What is my responsibility to my students for opening a can of worms that smells to high heaven? I don't want it. I write about it in my journal.

They are talking about their truth. Will they write it? What purpose is served by talk of the truth of despair, anger, pain? Wasn't it better for them to stick to politeness? Maybe it's good we meet only ten times. Let's Pretend served us well for most of the quarter.

So for this class they have written about any damn thing they want to, and not a one of them has chosen to write about what got him sentenced to life in prison. Jason will tell us frequently, "I participated in the taking of another human life," but he won't write about it. And I do not insist. I get humbler all the time.

And the writing process, where did it go? Well, in fact, it never went anywhere at all. It was right there all the time, getting jerked around by living human beings just as it got screwed with by the high school kids. Sometimes, it looked as though it would get blasted right out of existence. But it didn't. It shifted here and there, ducked some powerful artillery, fluttered in the winds of discourse but held its ground. In the end, talking and writing and talking some more, then rewriting, got this from David:

> *My first engine was an International Harvester DT 4656, an inline six-cylinder diesel engine for a grain mill. She was like my first girlfriend. Once you've been down deep into an engine all the way down to the pistons and have held them in your hands, and have held and cleaned every single part and assembled every piece with care hoping it will be a success and last forever it's like an intimate relationship. If the engine runs well and doesn't blow up well then that relationship was a success, and you don't want to give the truck back to the owner, he won't know how to take care of her. Seeing the trucks rolling down the highway that I have had involvement with is like seeing old girlfriends. You remember the long, intimate nights together, like women you really love but don't own and can't hold on to, you wish the trucks well and send them on their way.*

And that's the truth.

Jane Juska is an instructor in the teacher education program at Saint Mary's College and a Bay Area Writing Project teacher consultant.

Book Excerpt

Until We Are Strong Together:

Women Writers in the Tenderloin

◆

by Caroline E. Heller

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Columbia University
New York, NY

Caroline Heller, former associate editor of The Quarterly, *is now an assistant professor in the College of Education and in the English Department at the University of Illinios at Chicago.*

Editor's Note: In the late 1980s, when Caroline Heller was a doctoral candidate at the University of California, Berkeley and working as associate editor of this publication, she did not barricade herself behind ivy-covered walls. Rather, for three years she made the trip across the Bay to San Francisco's Tenderloin district, a neighborhood populated by, in addition to immigrant families, people who are old, poor, sick, homeless, addicted or otherwise disadvantaged. Here she became part of the Tenderloin Women Writers' Workshop. Her study of this group led to the book we are excerpting here. In this section we meet Laraine, a homeless African American woman, who is working with the group on a revision of an essay she intends to publish. Because of space considerations, we have had to make some minor deletions from the original, these are indicated by ellipses.

It's ten minutes before the workshop is scheduled to begin. Maria Rand enters the front meeting room of the Herold Hotel, home to the workshop since May 1988, and announces that she's in bad shape. "I'm coming down off a bad haircut!" In mock seriousness, she warns the three women — Clara, Laraine, and me, seated around the mahogany table – "Don't even look at my hair! This is the worst haircut in the history of haircuts. Even Samson had a better haircut than this! That's what I get for spending two-fifty!" Clara and I can't stop laughing. Now, neither can Maria. Clara in her punk haircut offers to rescue Maria's hair. "I could do it real short with scissors," she suggests. "It just needs to be shaped a little more." But Laraine, a thirty-year-old African American woman who has attended the workshop regularly since her arrival three months ago, seems oblivious to the carrying on. Bent over her spiral notebook, she writes at a furious pace, as if under deadline to get all her thoughts down before others arrive this morning and the workshop officially begins.

Once the entire group has assembled, Laraine volunteers to read first. She'd been rushing to finish the piece because she hopes to turn it into an article for the first issue of *Homeless Link*, a small news sheet highlighting issues concerning homeless people, that Laraine, with the workshop's encouragement, is trying to get off the ground. In her deep Maya Angelou-like voice, Laraine begins. "Okay. So this is a first draft. So you can say anything you want! I guess the title is 'Homeless Women, Don't Give Up! Get Up!' Okay, first I also want to say the idea I'm writing on is that police are not responding to homeless women and their problems." Laraine begins.

Homeless women are a breed of women who have been ignored by the democratic process. We have been silenced because we

are emotionally unequipped to live the American dream. We have our own dream and that is the right to grow as individuals and become what our creator designed our emotional and physical bodies for. We want to create, grow, and share our love rather than follow, suppress our destiny, and live up to the male ego expectations of what they think love ought to be. For this society has turned their backs on us. Many homeless women have given up. Rather than fight being raped, many give in. Why fight five or more men when your screams are ignored and the police only respond when you use a weapon to protect yourself, which is against the law, and the woman is the one who goes to jail? The democratic process has denied us civil, state, and our constitutional rights. We have been bombarded with false prophets– social workers and psychiatrists–who exploit our emotions and force us to take psychotic medications that have put us in a state of "I can't. Why try? I give up." Anger. Some great person of wisdom said, "It's always darkest before the dawn," and as a woman of experience, I say to you, "Don't give up. Get up."

In an interview, poet June Jordan responded to the question "What constitutes relevant writing?" by saying that for her, writing is "just another form of activism" (1991, p. 13). She added that when she herself considers the value of a text, she asks "if it is relevant to survival, relevant to justice." Then, careful that her literary values not be misconstrued as distantly high-minded, Jordan added, "What I really want is for people to be able to think about what it would be like, what it would mean, to have a nice day" (p. 14).

While in its present form her writing is unfocused and Laraine, homeless herself, relies more on a barrage of incompletely formed political clichés than on her more grounded insight "as a woman of experience." Jordan would undoubtedly place great value on what Laraine is trying to accomplish. However imperfectly, Laraine is attempting to examine the many forces that prevent homeless women from attaining productive lives, the countless issues that make "having a nice day" for some a rare achievement. Her sense of urgency to complete a draft of her piece before the workshop begins is based on her knowledge from past experience that the conversation her writing will likely spark will assist her, as it has others and her before, to think more clearly about the issues she's addressing and then to formulate her argument with more grace and certainty.

Here, workshop members help Laraine to discover what she's trying to get at:

Maria (who had been in New York caring for a sick friend for several weeks and hadn't yet met Laraine): You've been homeless?

Laraine: I'm homeless now.

Until We Are Strong Together
Caroline E. Heller

Maria: I'd like to hear about that.

Anita: When you say you are homeless, what does it actually mean? Where do you sleep at night?

Laraine: I live in a shelter. I'm homeless because I came to San Francisco three months ago and I haven't found an affordable place to live.

Anita: And this shelter, you have to be out of the shelters during the day?

Laraine: Yes, mmm-huh, and you sleep on the floor, and you…

Clara: It's horrible! I think you should get into it more. I literally lived on the streets for six months until we got into St. Anthony's, and God, they treat you like dirt 'cause you're on the streets.

Martha (the group's facilitator): Like it's your fault?

Mary: They turn them out before dawn, while it's still dark. It's dangerous!

Maria: Where do they go?

Clara: I had to get out of St. Anthony's at five in the morning. We'd go over to the Civic Center and lay on the bench. I had to get (my daughter) to school. Someone — the guy who waters and cleans — would call the police, and they'd come over and knock me with their sticks, start telling me what a bad mother I am because I don't have a place to live and my daughter's not in school. Ooh!

Marsha: And your daughter went to school all that time?

Clara: No, she missed quite a bit. She was too tired and all. You know how the diet is. She was sick. She was anemic. She had walking pneumonia. Oh, that was a real circus!

> ***"The problem for the homeless is that they have no place to live. It's not because they're crazy. It's not!"***

Mary (to Laraine): Do you have children?

Laraine: No. I am in St. Anthony's, though. I won't talk about it because it's probably the best one yet. So I don't want to, you know.

Martha: I understand that you don't want to, but what you might do is maybe include a few short stories like Clara's story. "Here's an example of somebody who is on the streets. It is not their fault. They were not able to afford housing …"

Maria: The issue is getting someone housing!

Martha: Right, be real clear that this is it. I also think that it's a good idea to include experiences from people. You don't have to say names. You can say– for example, the thing with the rape was a real good point.

Laraine: So you understood it?

Martha: Oh, yeah, that was the clearest thing. …

Laraine: I was trying to say that we have no rights. We're homeless because we have no places and they want to send you to these doctors in order to get into a place and then you have to go to therapy. I mean, you're there because you have no place to live.

Mary: I think you should actually put that up front, right in the beginning. The problem for the homeless is that they have no place to live. It's not because they're crazy. It's not!

Marsha: There was a great article in the *Tenderloin Times* about that. It took thirty years to find out that poor people need money! *(Many in the group, including Laraine and Clara, break into laughter.)*

Mary: Oh, I love that!

Marsha: We hope it doesn't take another thirty years to find out that homeless people need housing! *(Again, much laughter– Marsha, Clara, Laraine, Mary, and Maria are in stitches.)*

Maria (still laughing): We ain't nuts. We're homeless!

Marsha: It's because you have to put down eight hundred or a thousand dollars on your first apartment.

Maria: But also, this is election time, ladies. It's a good time to take advantage. And if a bunch of us get together and march to City Hall with signs, the TV guys will be down there because news is getting dull. No one's been murdered lately!

Laraine: That's already in the works, and if you guys would like to join us as a local group.

Maria: I'll join you.

Mary: We'll join you. I will. Let us know when it is.

Already, the concrete condition of being homeless — what living in a shelter or on the streets actually means as a daily experience — is brought home to the women in the group who hadn't experienced these conditions in their own lives. Both Mary and Maria move from referring to "them" in the questions they asked Laraine about homeless people to exhibiting the sense of solidarity evinced by the comment Maria — who isn't homeless — makes, " We're not crazy. We're homeless!" …

(Marsha, who has long battled depression and has educated herself in the pharmacology of treating it, steers the discussion to Laraine's text, in which she uses the term "psychotic" to describe medications.)

Laraine: It makes people psychotic! You get a person who has a problem and is depressed and then they put him on this medicine and they start hearing voices. I think I meant it that way. I meant psychotic.

Martha: What you might want to say is medicine that makes people feel crazy.

Laraine: That's exactly why you got a lot of people out there who can't take care of themselves. It's because of that medicine!

Martha talks about her own experiences with psychotropic medications, drugs that she feels have helped her with her own depression. The women discuss the difference between seeking assistance and having medications imposed on one, often as a poor substitute for economic and social assistance. Anita asks for clarification of Laraine's reference to "male ego expectations," and Mary asks her to read that part again. Laraine does so and suddenly realizes from rereading her draft that she isn't clear about her point, either.

Laraine (writing comments in the margin of her binder): Well, I thought I was attacking the American dream.

Martha: You mean male ego as in how men handle themselves? How men are in the world? How men treat women? Is that what you mean, Laraine?

Laraine: I was saying that the American dream is: "I have to get married or I have to live up to your expectations of what you think a woman is." And we don't want that American dream. We're not strong enough to deal with that.

Martha: That's good. What you just said there actually makes it clear.

Carolyn: You could expand that.

Nikki: When you say emotionally unequipped, it feels like a put-down. I forgot what line came next, but I just don't think that it fits for the article for women to be described with any kind of deficit, even if it's in somebody else's eyes.

Mary: Read it again, Laraine. *(Laraine reads her piece again.)*

Mary: What you mean is that other people think that homeless people are unequipped?

Laraine: I was saying that we are not emotionally equipped to live a life that is not designed for us to live. Did you understand?

Nikki: I understood that.

Mary: I understand that you're saying it wasn't even a choice. It's kind of like, how did I get to this world when I'm supposed to be this kind of person and I don't feel like I want to be this kind of person?

Laraine discusses her desire to explain to people through the article that some women on the streets are, in fact, particularly fragile and would find it difficult to lead what might commonly be considered normal lives. Marsha is still uncomfortable. "But that's just what they want to hear! They want to hear that we're all emotionally unequipped."

Laraine: Mmm-hmm. I know!

Marsha: Some big guy up top — captain of the police — is gonna say, "Aha! She said it!"

Laraine: Okay, thank you. I got to be more clear.

Mary: Yeah, because what we want to do is, we want the powers that be out there to listen, not just to turn off because they have their own ideas.

Laraine: Right.

Maria: Yeah, what I would like is the myths stop right there in your poem! Stop it! *(Maria, suddenly and uncharacteristically, begins to cry, and then chokes back her tears with laughter. Mary puts her hand on Maria's.)*

Laraine (looking at Maria): When I said that word, I know, it got me, too. But that's why I read it, because I just wrote it and I thought, well, I'll get some more ideas on it.

Martha: Once again, that's the really good thing about reading a draft like this, because then you start to talk about your ideas, and what you just said there was very clear.

Finally, the "American dream" is analyzed from a multigenerational perspective, with particular attention given to how this dream, as a cultural imperative, affects those who imagine different goals or require different life circumstances than they anticipate are culturally acceptable or available.

Marjorie, a shy woman 30 years Laraine's senior, who has lived as a widow in the Tenderloin for 30 years, had been jotting down notes throughout the discussion but hadn't yet spoken.

Marjorie: Could I ask a question? Would you give me your definition of the American dream? I realize the definition has changed over the years. What is your definition?

Laraine: The American dream would be, I get married and … (*She pauses.*) I fulfill my husband's desires rather than being myself.

Marsha: That's the American dream?

> ***See, that's the point I was trying to make! The American dream doesn't fit everybody. A lot of those people, they're not as strong as other people, but it shouldn't be held against them… There's nothing wrong with not being emotionally equipped.***

Magorie: It used to be the vine-covered cottage with the white picket fence. It was the same idea. That was my generation. You married a man who became successful so you got this world's goods. You had your own home and you had children and you gradually worked your way up the ladder of money. My generation was brought up to believe that. I was wondering when you said the "American dream" if things have changed. …

Laraine: See, that's the point I was trying to make! The American dream doesn't fit everybody. A lot of those people, they're not as strong as other people, but it shouldn't be held against them because they're not as strong. There's nothing wrong with not being emotionally equipped.

Anita: No, I see that point. …

Carolyn: (co-facilitating this session with Martha): You know, I think you could do a whole paragraph on what the American dream is … There are a lot of parts to this. Is cleanliness one? Are jobs? Are male-female relationships, or how you do those roles? Is that part of it?

Martha: You're using it very ironically, Laraine. You don't believe in the American dream. It hasn't worked for you. This piece got people really talking. It's going to be a good article. Really good ideas.

Carolyn: Will you bring it right back so we can see how it progresses?

Laraine: Okay.

Martha: We'll see it published.

It's been the kind of exhilarating conversation that would likely have lasted the full two hours of the workshop's time had others in the group not brought in work to be critiqued today. Because of the workshop's location, its limited audience, and the participants' disinclination to create an opposition between the affective and the intellectual, the discussion certainly hasn't been the Lehrer News Hour brand of social analysis— "today's group of experts diagnose our world."

But like the spirited and opinionated conversants who offer social commentary on televised national news discussions, the women of the workshop have their own deeply felt expertise and here exercise critical commentary and social analysis over an array of complicated issues affecting their own lives. And they do so with an intellectual hunger and curiosity that is rarely attributed to people living in the circumstances under scrutiny here.

For such individuals, policymakers are in the habit of creating narrowly conceived functional definitions of literacy and literacy programs that fit Marjorie's description of how our society tends to consider the poor and homeless. (For excellent critiques of literacy programs, particularly for poor women, see Brodkey, 1986; Horsman, 1990; Bee, 1993; Hull, 1993.) Such programs are created to offer people living in tenuous circumstances a second chance at some version of the American dream. But they are programs that often fail to honor the high intelligence, feistiness, and social needs of individuals like Laraine, Clara, and others in the workshop, each of whom feels both well-earned disappointment and well-reasoned reluctance either to embrace or to be embraced by an American dream antithetical to her own experiences and aspirations...

After the workshop discussion, Laraine decided to turn her article into a poem, which she brought to the group the following week, and which appeared in the inaugural issue of *Homeless Link* in October 1988. Her piece is powerfully improved in clarity and focus.

My eyes have seen the glory
of the coming of the Lord.
He is trampling on the police department
where harassment of the homeless is adored.
He has loosed his power of justice
on the brutalizers of the poor.
Our God is making noise.
Glory, glory, Lord of Justice
Glory, glory, Lord of Protection
Glory, glory, Lord of Justice
Your will is being done.

In the streets of San Francisco
Where the homeless cannot sleep,
Where the poor is arrested
Just for standing on the street
The women are not protected;
They are abused and disrespected.
Lord, let your will be done.

The discussion that followed Laraine's drafted poem was illustrative of many others inspired by workshop members' written texts —texts that then served as fulcrums for wide-ranging discussions and explorations. Each such discussion partook, in its own way, of what Jerome Bruner, as a description of the finest form of education, calls "the spirit of a forum" (1986, p. 123), where participants became critical and articulate about their own lives and about far-reaching subject matter. Again, through these explorations, distances between participants diminished as stories were told, knowledge was acquired, and forces that manipulated individual lives were analyzed and sometimes acted upon.

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Marjorie, always one of the quieter workshop participants, was asked to read "Ode to Pigeons" for comic relief at many public readings.

I really do like pigeons–
They help keep the streets clean.
Although I've never seen them move out a wino,
they did a good job on the half-a pizza on the sidewalk.
I really do like pigeons–
They sleep in my bedroom windowsill,
They get into fights and whack on the glass
And scare the hell out of me and the cat,
And I can't open the window because they would fall in.
They sit on the bathroom sill and they get into fights
and whack on the glass and scare the hell out of me and the cat
and I can't open the window
because out there
are two baby pigeons and four dead eggs.
I really do like pigeons —
They picked the windowsill as the ideal maternity ward
and eight different pigeons
laid 32 eggs
and raised 26 kids
and they all want to live on the sill
and I opened the window
and the screen was loose
and one morning I had 26 pigeons in my kitchen
having breakfast
and getting into fights
and the cat fainted.
In the living room
I can open my window
because they don't live on the sill;
they live over the door to the street
and when I go out,
they drop stuff on my head.
I really do like pigeons—
but I wish they'd move next door.

Should Shay Be Squelched?

Striking a Balance Between Discipline and Creativity

by

STACY LARSON

◆

Squelch . . . Squelch . . . Squelch . . . not the sound of feet in wet shoes, but the battle cry of Yoda, my English department head, who shuffles past my office, hunched, chin out as though expecting and warding off a blow; a slight turn of her head allows her eyes to slither in then dart away to look steadfastly and unimaginatively forward just as eye contact is established. She plods on.

Moments later, she sits across from a student in her office. "This just isn't college writing!" she shrieks, gnarled fists curled and waving the air above the crinkled paper in her lap. Tears stream from the student's eyes. Her white flag is up, and she sits beaten, ready to write whatever and however Yoda wants. A half-hour later, the student pushes through the half-open door, past me, and through the swinging glass door at the end of the hall, and I am admitted into Yoda's lair to discuss her evaluation of my teaching. That's how it was—really.

The most pressing concern of Yoda's department was student misconduct. English students had been known to issue death threats to their teachers and get into fights outside the English building. And yet, this school is located in a rural area in a conservative town that is not known for an exceptionally high crime rate.

I taught the same levels of required composition courses as those teachers who reported students who stalked them and students who sat in the back rows during lectures chanting and meditating, yet I encountered none of these behaviors. Oh, Dan required repeated reminding that chatting during mini-lessons was distracting to other students and to me, Gwen's wearing of wings made of gauze and glitter over her dress caused a slight stir, and Stephen had to be informed that "Oh, shit!" might not be the most appropriate response to missing a quiz question, but overall my students were similar to those I'd encountered at previous community and state colleges. They occasionally spoke out of turn, were consciously and unconsciously combative, and frequently had lengthy and impassioned reasons why their homework was not done.

Looking back now, I realize those stories of aggressive students and the departmental policy that we issue a handout on disruptive student behavior the first day of class with the syllabus had its effect on me; I entered class each day with an underlying dread that my average, everyday students like Justin, Jose, or Anne might that day metamorphose into psychopaths.

Yoda had taught at that school for over twenty-five years at the time that she penned the following evaluation of my class:

> *For the most part, students were cooperative and interested. Some comments students made were perceptive criticisms of the reading and suggested that Stacy taught critical thinking. But one group of young men were horsing around and might have been reined in . . .*

Reading this, I reflected back on the group of young men that had included Rod, Jesse, and Mark. They did tend to be loud as the discussion in their group gained momentum, and yet this change was such a pleasant one compared to the first few weeks when they sat, cross-armed, purse-lipped, and unresponsive.

"They need to be squelched a bit—that's all there is to it," Yoda explained. I wondered, though, if indeed that was all there was to it. As the year went on and not one sociopath emerged from the very diverse body of students in my classes, I wondered why squelching was so important, when and on whom it worked, and when it was that squelching went awry. I explored the issue with my colleagues, in my writing, and through observation of my students. Six months later, I took part in the San Joaquin Valley Writing Project. It was there that I grew as a teacher and a writer. It was there that I attended a portfolio reading for the kids' summer writing camp — and it was there that I met Shay, a sixteen-year-old who enlightened me.

Shay was like a brightly decorated Christmas tree, decorated, then forgotten to waste away into the month of March. A blue plastic clothespin dangled from the fold of skin separating her nostrils; two others, lavender and florescent yellow, hung from each lobe so that both ears were elongated, the blood drawn from points of contact to flame back angry red at the base of each lobe. A once-soft faded pink sweater stretched tautly across her emerging breasts, now adorned with hardened balls of knit, clumps of dried grass and crumbs. Dangling listlessly from beneath her pink sweater, her white wrists hung limply off the edge of the desk; slender fingers gripped a thick handmade book. Beneath the metal desk, two bare feet crowned with matching toes poked from beneath the frayed hem of baggy blue jeans, their perfect uniformity broken only by her right big toe for its nail had been halfway ripped off. Between each toe was a ridge of grime made up of dirt and sweat. Shay was part of the writing group assigned to me that day.

The room was like those found at any state university — one wall covered with impersonal green chalkboards riddled with chalk smudges, bare colorless walls and floors, desks clumped without plan in the middle of the room. Slumped teenagers wearing the trendy grunge look — straight hair, no make-up, striped shirts, faded and frayed baggy jeans, no shoes and bulky bead necklaces tied on with string—stared with practiced lack of interest.

"Who wants to share a piece from their portfolios?" I asked brightly, wondering if I would get a response, and worse, wondering what I would do if one of the creatures in front of me did respond.

"I don't have nuthin," Shay mumbled then disappeared with surprising agility into her pink sweater, flipping the back up so it covered her face, her arms, and her book. Only a jagged tuft of dark brown hair poked out creating a stark contrast to the stained white T-shirt that failed to hide the pointed angles of Shay's protruding shoulder blades. Soon, even the tuft of hair was quelled beneath the straining knit seams, and only a quiet rustling, crackling of paper, and measured smacking was heard beneath the pink sweater.

"Would one of you like to share?" my teaching partner Annie smiled placidly, her wide eyes flickering from one slumped form to another. "Or would you like one of us to share?"

They stared back at Annie, unblinking, unmoving, except for the odd sway of bare feet.

"You," one grunted. It could have been any one of them or all of them at once.

Annie looked at me expectantly so, clearing my throat, I began to read.

> *Intimidated by a high-energy horse, most novices will attempt to contain the horse by holding tautly to the reins without relief or release; seemingly, they believe that if a firm, steady pull means "whoa" or "stop," then a constant punishing pull means "stay stopped."*

Shay reappeared, slinking from beneath the pink sweater and past the group to sit in a desk just outside of the circle. She dipped her back into the chair and raised her knees so that her crossed ankles supported perched bare feet with blackened soles. It was a funny pose, comically grotesque, but strangely in keeping with the group. Calmly and methodically, she began to chew on the nail of the smallest toe on her right foot. The massed teenagers appeared not to hear the contented, suckling noises nor did they appear to notice the muddy trickle that made its way down Shay's chin to land in silent globs on the front of that pink sweater. I continued to read.

> *Unfortunately, if a horse has not been taught the cue or has had negative experiences that have led him to resist the cue, or is just exceptionally high-strung or excited, constant restraint has the opposite result.*

A whoosh came from Shay's corner as she blew a perfect pink bubble, its limp elastic form stretched into a pink bladder-like orb.

> *The horse's resistance builds, builds and finally explodes, resulting in a grounded rider and potential injury to others.*

I glanced up periodically, shifting my gaze from one face to another. Their blank stares never faltered.

> *This horse is like many students in classrooms of the nineties; these students vary not only in ability but also in conduct, and they have as many different reasons and excuses for their behavior as horses like the one above have.*

Shay removed the gum, bubble and all, and began stretching it from hand to hand before placing it gently back in her mouth.

> *The rider in the above situation very much resembles many instructors, novice and experienced alike, who—intimidated by the growing number of students in each classroom, the—* A soft whoosh was heard — *growing number of student complaints and the growing number of instructor reports of abusive students—attempt to squelch the potentially disruptive students, to inflexibly restrain and control them.*

With a sharp pop, the bubble exploded, becoming a shapeless pink blob at the end of the blue clothespin. Shay promptly and expertly spit the gum, clothespin too, onto the floor at our feet.

"Not the emphasis I had planned for that sentence," I smiled at Shay, including the others with my gaze, "but I guess it will do." I continued reading.

> *Unfortunately, squelching often has a negative effect. The malleable students are quickly squelched; they quickly conform and work their way through our classes with blinders on, no longer attempting original thought for fear of being considered radical, troublesome or just plain weird.*

Shay melted deeper into her chair, her feet moving to an unknown cadence. She feverishly riffled through her book.

"Who wants to read now?" Annie asked. "Let's hear from each of you ..."

"You go, Laurie. Laurie wants to go." As before, they seemed to speak with one voice—only Laurie and Shay were quiet. They all turned to look at the slender girl, her straight blond hair swept back from a lightly tanned face. Her smile revealed a gleaming retainer that shaped seemingly straight white teeth. Her clothes matched.

She blushed and began to read, "Raging thunder crashed and pounded with seeming vengeance . . . "

Shay's index finger flipped the corner of one tattered page in her book, making a clicking sound.

As Laurie ended, Shay shoved her book at Jason. "Here. Read this one."

"This one was written by Shay," Jason muttered.

"Read it right." Shay fingered the book as she passed it to him. Jason's voice deepened and became steadily more resonant as he read. *Lies shrieked for freedom from a non-existent truth* . . . I looked past Jason's bent head to look at Shay who was slumped rigidly, staring into herself . . . *would-be warriors fought the empty war . . . God exists not here . . . Mirrors exist not here* . . . The lines, like Medusa's snakes, seemed to surround us; I felt myself taunted and teased by Shay's words, dragged relentlessly down toward dark but critical revelation. Jason's deepened voice ended quietly, and there was silence.

"Here, I'll go next," Shay said and plunged in. "'. . . *The cancered heart . . . draining life from children's laughter . . .*' Oh, forget it. I'm not going to read that one."

"That's it — you're just going to leave us there?" I asked.

"Yeah, I don't like that one."

Annie and I left twenty minutes later, passing through the door, calling good-byes and thank-yous to the silent room of teenagers. As we moved down the dark stairway, Annie paused, saying with trilled laughter, "Weird kid . . . no social skills."

Annie's words played over and over in my mind, like the lyrics of an annoyingly simple but catchy advertisement jingle, and I thought of Shay. I remembered how she had huddled beneath the faded pink sweater, her odd punctuation of every sentence—whoosh—slurp—pop—and the shadows briefly glimpsed behind the reflective windows of her poetry. Weird, yes, but beneath frayed hems, limp white wrists, and gaily colored but grotesquely contorted clothespins, Shay wove a fragile web of words; Shay was a writer.

I have not encountered a large number of Shays in my community college classrooms; what makes her case so interesting is that it is so extreme. There is no doubt that Yoda would have argued that Shay's behavior was completely disruptive, that she was "horsing around" and needed to be "squelched." And yet, I am convinced that to have done so would have resulted in alienating the group and further encapsulating Shay in her cocoon outside of our activity.

Shay and several other students that I have encountered in the past year have led me to believe that true squelching in the form of challenging or berating a student whose behavior deviates from the norm can alienate not only that student but also the rest of the class and stymie an opportunity for setting up positive classroom dynamics. An easygoing acknowledgment of the behavior, a sense of humor, and continuation of the planned activity can often go a long way toward diffusing a potentially aggressive, troublesome, or otherwise disruptive student. What Shay taught me is that even students with behaviors as extreme as hers can be "caught" in the learning process—or alienated from it—depending on my response.

As I reflect back on my interactions with Yoda, I speculate that much of her advocacy of squelching has resulted from the change she has seen in students' behavior over her lengthy teaching career. In the same way that I don't know what came first between the chicken and the egg, I don't know what came first between squelching and aggressive student behavioral problems at that particular school. I also don't know whether Shay was created as a result of squelching or as a lack of squelching. What I do know, though, is that squelching is no panacea for student problems, and sometimes other methods might reel in those at-risk students.

I picture Yoda today, still with gnarled fists waving, dry voice cracking, eyes slithering away from contact — the love of students that long-ago called her to teaching squelched by her own methods. I picture her plodding on ... and on ... and on.

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Sound and Sense:

Grammar, Poetry and Creative Language

by

RAY SKJELBRED

◆

Arianna and Jill are working as partners during a writing practice in seventh-grade English. One of them is writing a detailed description of a photograph she has been given. The other, who is not looking at the photograph, has been asked to quickly write a list of active verbs, the kind that might provide unexpected energy if they were suddenly dropped into a piece of writing. Of course, that's what's going to happen next. All around the room, partners go on to try out the new verbs in the descriptions of photographs. Many verbs won't work at all. They might be too silly or even too predictable. But within minutes, with a little nudging and bending, a few minor miracles begin to happen.

Arianna and Jill's piece is one such miracle:

> *The chic lady lounges casually on a plush couch. Cigarette in her left hand black gloves and a silver sequined purse in her right she wears a carefree look on her made up face. Her hat saunters over her glowing eyes and her red lipstick shines in the light. Her black and red blouse falls loosely over her toned arms, and her shoulders smile out from underneath it. Her thick ring antagonizes her thin fingers, red nails floating to a perfect point.*

When Arianna and Jill inject into their paragraph surprising verbs like "saunters" and "antagonizes," they begin to sound less like seventh-graders and more like John Updike. Arianna likes this writing practice, noting,

> *It shows how I incorporated words that are not expected to fit in and made them work. I particularly liked where I wrote 'Her hat saunters over her glowing eyes' because you can imagine a hat strutting and showing off, even though it really isn't possible.*

I incorporate a generous dose of grammar into the writing portion of my seventh-grade English classes at Marin Country Day School, but not grammar in the traditional sense. Students do not learn to diagram someone else's writing. Instead, students use grammatical and syntactical principles in their own writing to construct more effective sentences, paragraphs, and poems. We also study phonology, the sounds language makes, listening as we read for overlapping sounds and repeating rhythms. By combining the study of the structure and the sound of language with creative writing, we practice skills and discover infinite writing possibilities all in the same pen stroke.

Then what about "saunter?" Arianna and Jill knew it was an active verb, a surprising one that made a new kind of sense in relation to its context. But this word is full of listening as well as seeing. Listen more closely to the repeating "er" sounds in their sentence: "Her hat saunters over her glowing eyes." Are the girls conscious of the rolling r's in their sentence? I hope so. I want to train them to hear these patterns. I give examples, we practice, we read aloud, we listen and learn from each other. Then listening, as well as seeing, becomes habit.

One way I begin to train their ears is by asking students to make lists of wonderful-sounding words.

144

This is strictly a listening game; they shouldn't write "lunch" just because they're hungry. Students usually fly into this sort of thing, and a few minutes later, when I ask for words, almost everyone (including me) wants to contribute. I rapidly write these words all over the blackboard. There are lumpy words, silly words, long, flowing vowel-filled words and short, hard lumps of consonants. Students have fun saying them aloud and generally some words elicit laughs. I then tell them to use their own words, borrow from other contributors if they wish, add other words as necessary, change forms when logical and put together a good line or good lines, or a poem or a serious thought or whatever else might happen, this time making use of sense and ideas but concentrating on the sound possibilities in the original words.

Unexpected words can go together, creating amazing images — like syllables creeping through teeth — and unique sound relationships can provide a poetic energy.

Lisa wrote this list: cauliflower, syllable, sifted, chickadee, volcano, sloth and detergent. Then she quickly assembled this piece:

> *She stumbles home carrying groceries with the cauliflower peeking out.*
>
> *On the other side of the street a man loads his laundry into the tumbling washer and his detergent sifts into the bubbling water.*
>
> *Outside, the homeless dog spots a chickadee. Leaving his master he darts through the traffic like a determined sloth.*
>
> *Just as the syllables creep through her teeth the fog erupts like a volcano in the dust.*

She was surprised by what she had written, but she was beginning to see that the possibilities of writing are much larger than what she'd imagined. Unexpected words can go together, creating amazing images — like syllables creeping through teeth — and unique sound relationships can provide a poetic energy.

A mixing of sounds, syllables and parts of speech suggests a wide set of possible mix-and-match writing practices. On one occasion we made separate adjective-noun lists and blended them together. They first made random lists of nouns and adjectives, and then paired the nouns and adjectives on the basis of various vowel sounds: "i" as in "thin," "eh" as in "rent," "ou" as in "loud," "oo" as in "moose," "e" as in "key." The phrases they came up with appeal to the ear:

depressed bed
messy letter
jittery clip
eccentric ticket
idiotic pillow
dumbfounded empress dowager.

Then I had them practice matching a particular adjective suffix ending, such as "ous," "ing," "able," "ible," and "ful," with any noun that sounds good, resulting in:

vicious pillow
victorious lipstick
faithful eraser
rentable desert
tiring eyeball
plentiful mildew.

Writing models are easy to find. If I ask for nouns, I can show them Mona Van Duyn's "A Small Excursion," which is full of the physical weight of names and places as she takes us on a journey through America. The opening reads:

Take a trip with me
through the towns in Missouri.
Feel naming in all its joy
as we go through Braggadocio, Barks, Kidder, Fair Play,
Bourbon, Bean Lake
and Loose Creek.
If we should get lost
we could spend the night at
Lutesville, Brinktown, Excello, Nodaway,
Humansville, or Kinderpost.

Claire wrote a noun poem after looking at a forestry service poster:

What strange names we come up with
Trees called
Ginkgo,
Ash,
Magnolia,
Pine.
Come sit with me under a Sycamore tree.
Come walk with me under American Elms
Hickory,
Oak,
Dogwood,
Holly,
Maple,
Spruce,
Juniper,
Fir.
Come stand with me in the shade of a Tulip tree
Come walk in a grove of Redwood.
Come rest on the trunk of a Cottonwood.
Come enter the forest with me.

If I ask them to exploit prepositional phrases, I can show them James Wright's "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota" to demonstrate the particular creative and grammatical force of prepositions. It is a wonderful poem and often used by writing and poetry teachers, and his observations — "Over my head," "Down the ravine," "Into the distances," "In a field of sunlight between two pines," — not only show how he is seeing, but how language works. Student practices grow easily from the language concepts in this poem and I often have students write prepositional phrase observations as they quietly sit outside and write about what they see in specific locations. Ben's poem is an observation full of the rhythm of prepositional phrases:

Below me the brown sugar sand clumps in the indentation of my foot.
Up the hill I hear the sound of a jackhammer smashing
the smooth, gray concrete.
The trees down by the creek are mostly leafless,
After years of constantly taking the burden of watching six year old children.
Off in the distance the bay is throwing itself up on to
the shore
as it has always done.
In the trees by the office a few lingering leaves
struggle to cling to their branches.
Silently a gray seagull swoops by from overhead.
The once orange pole which holds the basketball hoop
is now gray
from many years of missed shots.
Across the creek, behind the rings,
a lonely sweater waits patiently for its owner to come
and get it.

If I ask for writing that emphasizes one syllable words, I often present Gary Snyder's "Yase: September" which begins:

Old Mrs. Kawabata
cuts down the tall spike weeds-
        more in two hours
than I can get done in a day.

Of course there is much to say about the "how" or "why" of this poem, but the force, perhaps even the dignity of the characterization comes from the simplicity of sound, especially in contrast to the long, flowing sound of "Kawabata." The practices and possibilities seem obvious. Nick was inspired by a Galway Kinnell poem about blackberries and tried his own, with an emphasis one-syllable words:

The bushes grow thick around the swings,
curving up the red, rusted metal,
the forest green, punctuated with the punctual growth
of black, blackberries
every winter, with the frost, they come.
My hands reach for the fruit,
and grab hold of a black one,
red juice spurts out and it leaks down my hand,
down my arm, to my shirt
where every year a new stain shows,
marking the beginning of the time,
when black nights,
lead to bright, red days.

Verb practices are easy. If I ask students how they entered the room and they say, "We walked," I can always say, "Well, that's one way. Now let's think about other possibilities, some other actions. How else could a person get into this room? Maybe the room is locked up tight. Or perhaps someone is trying to stop you. You'll notice yourself expanding your verb choices, expanding the action of your sentence." Then, to make it a little more fun, we pick someone from the class to be the one trying to get into the room. The class takes a few minutes to write verb possibilities, they read them aloud and I gather the choices together to make a composite action sentence.

> *Leanne pounded, dissolved, seeped, threw herself, butted the wall with her head, chopped her way with a hacksaw, smashed, rocketed, chainsawed, oozed, bit through the lock, shrank into an atom...*
>
> *Michael hammered, sifted, waltzed, screamed and the building caved in, bashed, vaporized, used a can opener, dug his way, morphed into, used a library pass, clicked the heels of his red slippers three times...*

Not every practice leads to "serious" writing, but when the habits are established, I think serious writing comes more easily. Last year we had some success with an infinitive-prepositional phrase exercise that seemed to stimulate some solid writing and thinking. Every student had learned the infinitive verb form and we considered infinitives and imperatives in writing, and the general force of beginning lines with verbs. We looked at the use of verbs in Gary Snyder's poem, "Things to Do Around a Lookout," which begins:

Wrap up in a blanket in cold weather and just read.
Practise writing Chinese characters with a brush
Paint pictures of the mountains
Put out salt for deer

Students also discovered that in contrast to the potentially short, blunt impact of opening verbs, prepositional phrases were long, flowing and visual, like rocks skipping across water. They all wrote separate infinitive-preposition lists and we made random connections. I called one student to supply an infinitive, then another to produce a prepositional phrase, then an infinitive, then a prepositional phrase, and short lines of grammar and poetry took shape in the air.

Helena looked at the process carefully, took the concept and fashioned this poem:

Things To Do

To saunter through anger
And laugh out loud
To swim through fear
And still breathe under water
To flip over hate

Seventh-Grade Poets

If you hang on every word
you may forget to breathe.
Stay awhile;
Underneath what you say
the earth follows
its own wide field
and rivers correct themselves.
Tomorrow your mistakes
will still be here,
but you can always revise
places where you listened,
or remember how water was cold.
All the signals you need
are in front of you
if you only look for
what you are finding.
—Kailyn

Your words give a shove
and your vowels follow each other
in a reckless tangle
like people suddenly pushed
onto an icy surface,
hanging together, irregular
full of weight and force
until you feel the rhythm
and a single clear line curves away
cool and balanced.
—Ryan

Even when you cross them out
one word leads to another
if they trust you.
Sound has no ego
and offers everything.
Just choose, and lean in.
—Erica

And land on my feet
To sing through despair
And hear my voice echo
To gasp close to sickness
And breathe in sweet air
To dance through chaos
And find my own rhythm
To ignore disaster
And find someone to celebrate with

Although this poem is based simply on connecting infinitives with prepositional phrases, the central connecting theme takes it far beyond simple formula writing. Using ordinary parts, Helena made unforeseen discoveries.

The results of practicing language play are cumulative. Once young writers learn to manipulate language, they keep using the techniques because the effects are powerful.

The use of clauses in teaching syntax is particularly exciting, since dependent clauses, especially adjective clauses (linked by relative pronouns) and adverb clauses (linked by subordinating conjunctions) not only connect at least two ideas in an instant, but also give a rhythmic "shove" to any idea that spins out from a writer's mind. Whitman's "When lilacs last in the door-yard bloom'd" is not great poetry just because he begins with "when" (subordinating conjunction), but the extension of this idea is made possible because of the grammatical "shove." Emily Dickinson can allow an abstract idea to unfold when she writes "Because I could not stop for Death." Galway Kinnell even wrote a three-page, one-sentence fishing poem ("Angling, a Day") that hangs together by his use of "though," until he jars to a halt with his independent clause: "...we have caught nothing." And, naturally, Shakespeare's sonnets are full of opening "whens."

A couple of years ago, I bumped into a William Stafford notebook entry where he wrote something like this, "If goats liked my poetry I would have to start over again," and I thought what a wonderful opportunity for students to see how abstraction works and at the same time exploit the power of the dependent clause. I proposed that everyone write "if" poems that would consider what might happen if certain kinds of animals liked a student's writing. The blending of the abstract and the concrete and the grammatical force of the construction created a strong set of poems that had enough in common that our class was able to give a poetry reading and present the whole thing as if it were a single poem.

Here are some that demonstrate the process and can easily be read together as a single idea:

If birds liked my poetry
the words would soar through the air
and glide onto the page, flapping their vowels.
—Toby

If condors liked my poetry they
Would live in the comfort
Of my words shredded for their nest
They would tie my poetry together
So when their baby birds
Learned how to fly
They would
Have
A
Parachute
To help them
—Arianna

If fish liked my poetry
they would share it in all their schools
And if they really liked my poetry,
they would propel across the writing,
keeping their eyes open at all times.
—Oliver

If lions liked my poetry
They might stalk it
And kill it
And guard it all the time
And I would have to start over
Another little rhyme
—Joe S.

If squids liked my poetry,
they would leave what is good bare,

but they would black out the bad parts,
leaving nothing there.
—Spencer C.

Listen to Spencer's use of one-syllable words, his natural, comfortable use of rhyme, and his overlapping sounds, even though the exercise was specifically about "if"-generated dependent clauses. The results of practicing language play are cumulative. Once young writers learn to manipulate language, they keep using the techniques because the effects are powerful.

How do I measure the success of this kind of approach to language? Well, if ideas and grammar and accents and syllables and so on, all exist together, I can observe and discover success by seeing these elements mixed in the overall writing of students, and if their responses to this process are generally strong and positive, I feel we are on the right track. Of course, I can test skills too. For example, I often give individual photographs to every student (*Arizona Highways* is my favorite source), then I ask them to observe well and try out certain practices. In one instance, I asked them to begin with a subordinating conjunction, then told them to focus on accurate adjectives that give small, specific, seeing details, and to use active verbs that give life to the descriptions and sentences whenever possible. This is what I believe is a grammar test and here are some samples.

Danika wrote:

> *Although the large and jagged rocks are gray, when the sun shines upon them a golden color seems to appear. On these rocks a messy type of plant grows, covering and protecting the rock's skin. Far off in the distance, through a crevice in the rocks, a desolate town can be seen.*

Perry leaned on "when" to lead him in:

> *When the sun glimmers off the craggy rock, the sunlight makes a reflection and part of the lake turns a golden color. The shadow line is bumpy as is the hill that shadows it. The moon shines dimly above the age old rock. In the water lay rocks with their heads poking out as if to get a first glimpse of the world.*

Jesse looked hard, chose "although" and felt the rhythm of one-syllable words:

> *Although this cliff is hard, solid rock, it also looks like soft clay about to lose its structure and collapse, making the small houses crumble. The houses are almost snuck into the only opening on the plateau.*

Remember, this is seventh-grade writing. They had about 30 minutes and they didn't know in advance what they would be called upon to say. They did well, but they were practiced in the craft.

Creativity and basics grow together. Grammar rules are useless if we don't know how language functions. Knowing that one word is better than another in a specific situation is important. Knowing a vocabulary of grammar and talking thoughtfully about ideas and sentence possibilities is important. We should not have to make a choice between the wild poem and the subordinating conjunction. They know each other.

During this last year, Jonathan had success with poetry that grew from an adjective-noun combining process where he came up with "empty/chair" and "grim-faced/optimism" and in response to his work he wrote,

> *Was this practice useful? Definitely. Randomly combining types of words always creates something interesting. With this random combining, unlikely phrases can be thought up, leading to original ideas that one could never come up with in consciousness. That is what makes a good poem: an idea so different that one could never see it coming.*

Jonathan, Arianna and the others have discovered new approaches to writing that mix ideas, sounds, grammar and rhythm to create texts that surprise the reader and even the author. If the goal of grammar instruction is better student writing, then these kinds of grammar lessons really work.

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Literature as Language:

Using Kids' Books to Teach About Words

by

CHRISTINE FACCIOLI

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Editors' note: This is the second of two articles by Christine Faccioli describing children's literature that may inspire children to write. The first article, published in the Winter, 1997 issue of The Quarterly, *described children's literature, past and present, that features children writing. In this issue of* The Quarterly, *Faccioli profiles books targeted at primary children that playfully manipulate language to help foster in children a love of words.*

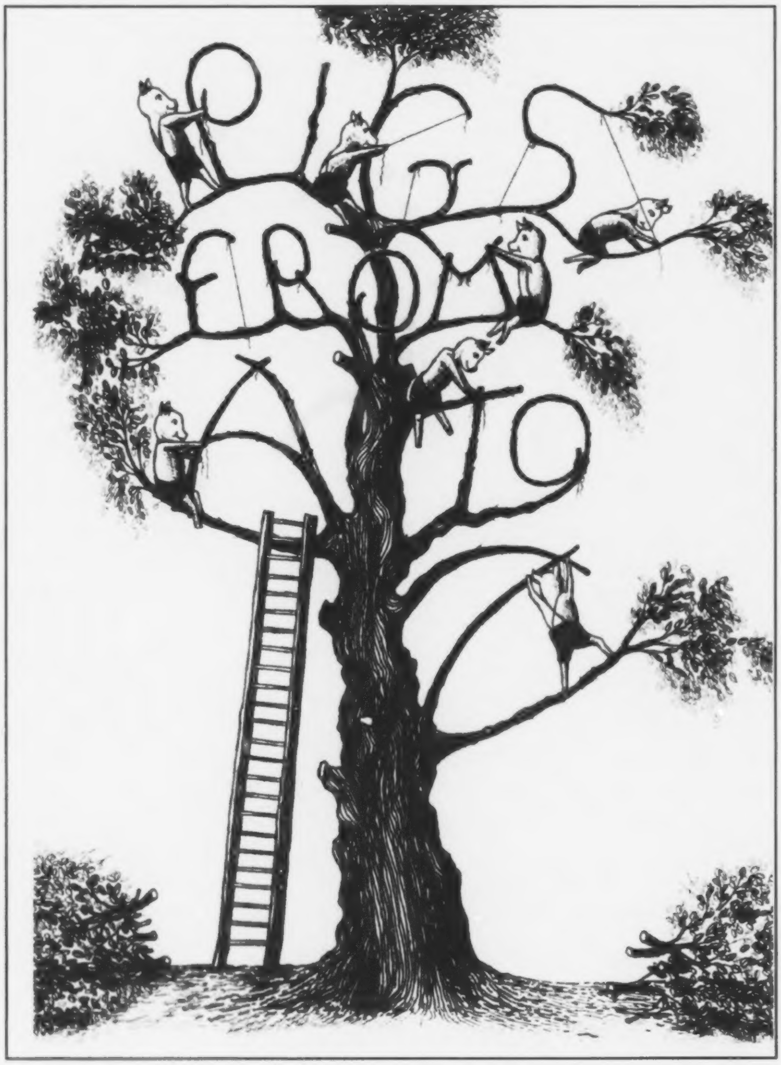
Christine Faccioli is the librarian at West Bradford Elementary School in Downingtown Area School District, Downingtown, Pennsylvania.

Long, long ago when I was in the seventh grade, the West Chester School District adopted a text called *Word Wealth* to help students develop skills in vocabulary and spelling. Most of the seventh-grade students grumbled, moaned, whined, and complained about the weekly lesson and test. "Why do we have to learn this? Whoever heard of such a word? When would anyone use a word like this?" was the seventh-grade mantra. Although I joined in (what seventh-grader would ever disagree with her peers?), I really loved the weekly word list. The words were unusual, unique, one-of-a-kind. The book explained each word's etymology and gave several examples of usage in context. The spelling part of the program didn't sink in — I was a terrible speller then and still am — but the study, meaning, and general fascination with words has stuck.

But how, as a librarian and a teacher, do I convey to students just how wonderful words can be? How do I get students to appreciate the selection of the "right" word as it enriches the text in a variety of ways? Maybe I can't guide every child to become a devoted word lover and user, but I should be able to spark an interest and encourage students to notice the power and influence words can have.

Some topics of study lend themselves to word appreciation more than others. Poetry is an obvious example, but I've brought word study to the notice of students while teaching mythology, character development, sequencing, rising action, folk and fairy tales, note taking, and much more. To suddenly introduce a word study lesson in the midst of literature can seem abrupt and disconnected unless, through the years, it's become a routine and natural part of reading and writing. To make that happen it's best to introduce the study of words at all grade levels in a manner appropriate to students' maturity and development. By doing so students play with the sounds and meanings of words throughout their education.

And surprisingly enough, it's fairly easy to do. Almost all children notice words very early in their lives and quickly learn to use them. Young children realize that imitating the sounds of adults can bring a gratifying response. Who hasn't applauded a baby's first words or rushed to satisfy their early commands? As children mature and conquer the oral language of family, peers, and community, they can expand their language by turning to literature. Toddlers learn nursery rhymes and chants through repetition and practice with parents and care givers. As they memorize and master these, they become more capable of listening to longer folk and fairy tales which also rely on repetition and rhyme to emphasize the tale's plot. That in turn promotes the child's ability and desire to translate text on his own. Book publishers know this and promote authors whose books follow a predictable pattern and use a basic set of rhyming words. The very best of these authors, such as Theodore Geisel (aka Dr. Seuss), also invest these books with a humorous premise, funny characters, or an unlikely situation that makes them a favorite of beginning readers. *Green Eggs and Ham* or *The Cat in the Hat* may have never won a literary award, but everyone remembers them fondly.



As a librarian/teacher, I need to find a way to promote word study as I instruct, engage, and enrich students throughout the grade levels. In this article, however, I will concentrate on some ideas that can be put to use in kindergarten, first and second grade.

Letter recognition is one of the beginning tools of word observation. Simply noticing how letters are shaped and their associated sounds are a part of the typical kindergarten curriculum, but several books take this basic skill and invite students to experiment and play with the alphabet. The 1997 Caldecott Honor book, *Alphabet City* by Stephen Johnson, leads children to notice how the alphabet letters can be found in many everyday objects seen in towns and cities everywhere. There are "A"s formed by the supports of a sawhorse blocking off a construction area. Looking at the side of an overhead traffic signal the reader sees the shape of an "E", and "Z"s are made as metal fire escapes cling to the sides of brick buildings.

Alphabatics by Suse MacDonald simply has each letter shown in a bright color in both upper and lower case. She then, usually in a series of progressive blocks, has the basic letter shape transform itself into part of a larger picture that begins with that letter. For example, "d" becomes the curled tail of a dragon; "m" becomes a man's mustache; "n" flips and turns to become a nest for baby birds. The letters imitate the title by turning and twisting in acrobatic moves to become something else. Some of the words will be familiar to a young child, while others, like yak, xylophone, and quail are easily understood because the letter has become a picture to illustrate the word. Unfortunately, there is no plot to tie the letters to a common theme.

A book like Arthur Geisert's *Pigs from A to Z* requires much more discrimination in letter identification. Seven pigs plan and build a tree house. Hidden within each illustration are five forms of an alphabet letter for the reader to find. To allow the student to search even more, some of the pigs are hidden and the preceding and following alphabet letters are also included in the picture. Some of the letters and pigs are easy to spot but others are not. For example, as the little pigs enjoy a spectacular view shingling the roof of their tree house in the "S" picture, it's simple to spy the "S"-shaped roads among the mountains in the background. It takes careful examination to notice a rope has curled into an "s" as one pig uses it to haul shingles to the top. The ski jump on a nearby mountain forms another "S," and water from a dam flowing into a waterfall creates a "T."

Children and adults find it tough to resist the appeal of teddy bears. Kathleen and Michael Hague have combined their talents to create *Alphabears*. Each little teddy, distinct in appearance and circumstance, has a rhyming couplet to emphasize its personality. As they go through the alphabet, readers can meet Robert Bear, "who thinks that it's great to sit by the fire and read until late;" Charles Bear, a "stuffy old bear who wears a bow tie and a part in his hair;" or little Laura Bear, who "doesn't like lightning — she thinks that the sound of thunder is frightening."

The Guinea Pig ABC by Kate Duke shows guinea pigs, equally charming and cute, illustrating a single word or concept with their antics. Some are obvious; a guinea pig peers anxiously down from the line across the "H," suggesting "high." A guinea pig slides down the curves of an "S"; the word "slippery" is printed below. Vain is the word choice for "V," certainly not an easy concept to explain to young students. But one look at the guinea pig adjusting her dandelion bonnet while admiring herself in a hand mirror makes the concept crystal clear.

All alphabet books don't rely on simple letter presentation. Nikki Grimes' *C is for City* features many double-page spreads for the alphabet letters with a rhyming verse that leads the reader past common big city sites, people, and happenings.

> *T is for turnstile and trains full of tourists,*
> *for tough-talking boys with steel taps on their shoes,*
> *T is for taxi and two-story town houses,*
> *next door to temples with hard, wooden pews.*

The accompanying illustrations match the text but also incorporate more items, such as a trombone, teddy bear, telephone, tennis racket, tutu, trash can, and top hat, whose names match the letter. As with *Pigs from A to Z*, a key is included for those who like to check if they've found all the answers. It's also fun to spot the big black and white cat who meanders through on every page.

Definitely a challenging read-aloud is *Aster Aardvark's Alphabet Adventures* by Steven Kellogg. The alliterative title becomes a lovely lesson to link the letters with words that show the same successive sound. It's a mighty mouthful to master. Kellogg's illustrations complement a complicated collection of words.

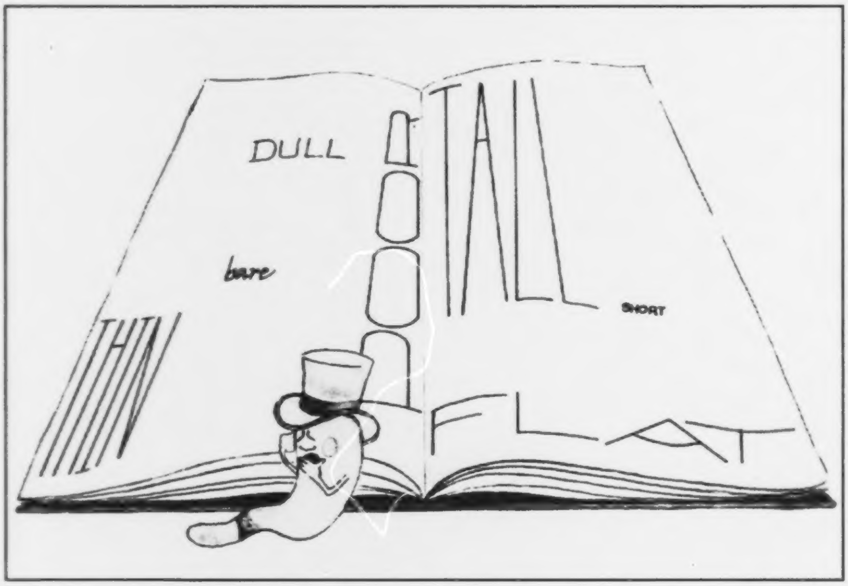
Some beginning students find it easy to learn one short word and, by rhyming, begin to recognize its root and how it can change. Sometimes the story doesn't always have a complex plot. *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish* and other titles by Dr. Seuss are favorites of beginning readers simply for their predictability and how easily the illustrations prompt the correct rhyming text. A fish that has wrinkled scales, a long straggly beard, and granny glasses is obviously elderly, while a wide-eyed baby fish tucked into a carriage is just a youngster, so reading the lines "old fish, new fish" is easy for most students. There's something about the pattern of rhyming that allows many children to first memorize it, then "read" it. *Jamberry* by Bruce Degen continues this format. Building on the word "berry," a boy and bear spend a "berry" nice day picking, eating, and frolicking. They put berries in "Hatberry, shoeberry, in my canoeberry" as they float

> *"Under the bridge*
> *and over the dam*
> *looking for berries*
> *berries for jam."*

Most readers can't "bear" for the story to end and want to reread it again and again.

Other rhyming stories use "terse verse" to present the rhyme. *One Sun* by Bruce McMillan presents a complete story by only using two rhyming words for each page. McMillan illustrates his text with photography. Under *One sun* a small boy spends a day at the beach with a "wet pet" and friends. They see a "snail trail," "a lone stone," and "six sticks." They play with a "stuck truck," "small ball," "whale pail," and "white kite." They join the "tan man" (lifeguard) on his "neat seat."

A Day At Damp Camp by George Ella Lyon features short verse complemented with water colors by Peter



Catalanotto. Each illustration is set atop a larger illustration producing a layered effect. The campers find a "frog log," then see a "bug tug" as ants wrestle food to their hole. When a reptile unexpectedly appears, it's time for a "snake shake" as the campers run off in panic. Students usually find it easy to guess the second word of the rhyming pair with the help of the illustration.

With the aid of a picture, students are also able to complete an even longer rhyming phrase. *"I Can't," Said The Ant* by Polly Cameron provides support for the beginning reader by using a repetitious rhyme scheme throughout, showing the word to be rhymed and read, and also giving a small sketch of the word. By combining all those cues, even reluctant readers feel confident in making a guess to complete the line.

Most students seem to know how to rhyme automatically. They know that "sink" and "bed" do not rhyme but "red" and "bed" do. But other students just don't understand and even the ones that do can't always articulate how rhymes work. This is when the librarian/teacher can use a text that enriches and supports some students and at the same time provides examples and practice for others. In the book *The Witch's Hat* by Tony Johnston, a witch's hat accidentally falls into her magic pot which transforms it into a bat, rat, and cat. As in the story, I too have used a "magic pot." After the letter "H" from hat gets dropped in, students pull out other alphabet letters from the pot and try positioning them as the beginning letter sound of "_at." Bat, rat, and cat were all in Johnston's book but now students get a chance to see that it can also become fat, mat, Nat, pat, and sat. Depending on the letters and the ability of the students, it can also become flat, slat, vat. And just think how it changes when "e" or "o" gets placed at the beginning of "_at." For some students the physical task of maneuvering different letters into position helps them better understand the concept of rhyme. A set of letters can be used repeatedly by a group or individuals to experiment with changing and rhyming words.

Probably one of the most popular of easy rhyming books that relies on a limited vocabulary and has a humorous plot is Nancy Shaw's *Sheep In A Jeep*. Margot Apple's five sheep, realistically drawn animals with human facial features, start out happily enough in a jeep; but, by the story's end, post a sign '"Jeep for sale—cheap." It's a great combination of terse verse, easy rhyming, and delightful illustration. The book was such a hit that Shaw and Apple have also published *Sheep on a Ship, Sheep in a Shop, Sheep Out to Eat*, and *Sheep Take a Hike*. Shaw and Apple recently published *Sheep Trick or Treat* (Houghton, 1997). All these titles usually become favorites of beginning readers and other readers too.

As students achieve success and become more confident in their ability to read, they begin to seek more of a challenge in their texts. They still love and continue to read and reread their favorites, but they also want to prove to themselves and show others their capability to understand and enjoy words which are more difficult. Rather than concentrate on recognizing individual words, students now look at phrases and "bigger ideas" groups of words can convey. Instead of a literal word-by-word interpretation, students understand words in a more figurative sense.

With her lack of understanding and mistaken interpretations of common words and phrases, Amelia Bedelia, who's been shared by two authors and drawn by several illustrators, delights beginning readers. Her confusion with phrases, idioms, and homophones lets beginning readers laugh at her "foolish" errors while reinforcing and broadening their own understanding. Amelia Bedelia, through the years, has turned the Rogers' household topsy-turvy, tried a variety of unsuitable occupations, given a bridal shower with real water, played baseball, celebrated Christmas, cared for a baby, gone camping, introduced her relatives, and acquired a driver's license — all with hilarious results. She puts out the lights by hanging them on the clothesline in the backyard, and steals home while playing baseball by picking up the base. When Mr. Rogers allows her to practice driving the car, here's what occurs:

> *"Bear left!" shouted Mr. Rogers.*
> *So Amelia Bedelia made a sharp turn to the right.*
> *"Amelia Bedelia!" shouted Mr. Rogers. "Why did you turn right?"*
> *"Because," said Amelia Bedelia, "you warned me about the bear."*
> *"What bear?" asked Mr. Rogers.*
> *"You said there was a bear on the left," said Amelia Bedelia.*
> *"There was no BEAR!" yelled Mr. Rogers. "I said bear LEFT."*
> *"If I'd known that the bear had left, I would not have turned right."*
> *Mr. Rogers was about to blow up. The tire beat him to it.*

Amelia Bedelia, first written in the mid 1960s, has always presented homophones within the plot such as when the mechanic asks Amelia Bedelia,

> *"Would you like me to give you a tow?"*
> *"I've got all the toes I need," said Amelia Bedelia.*

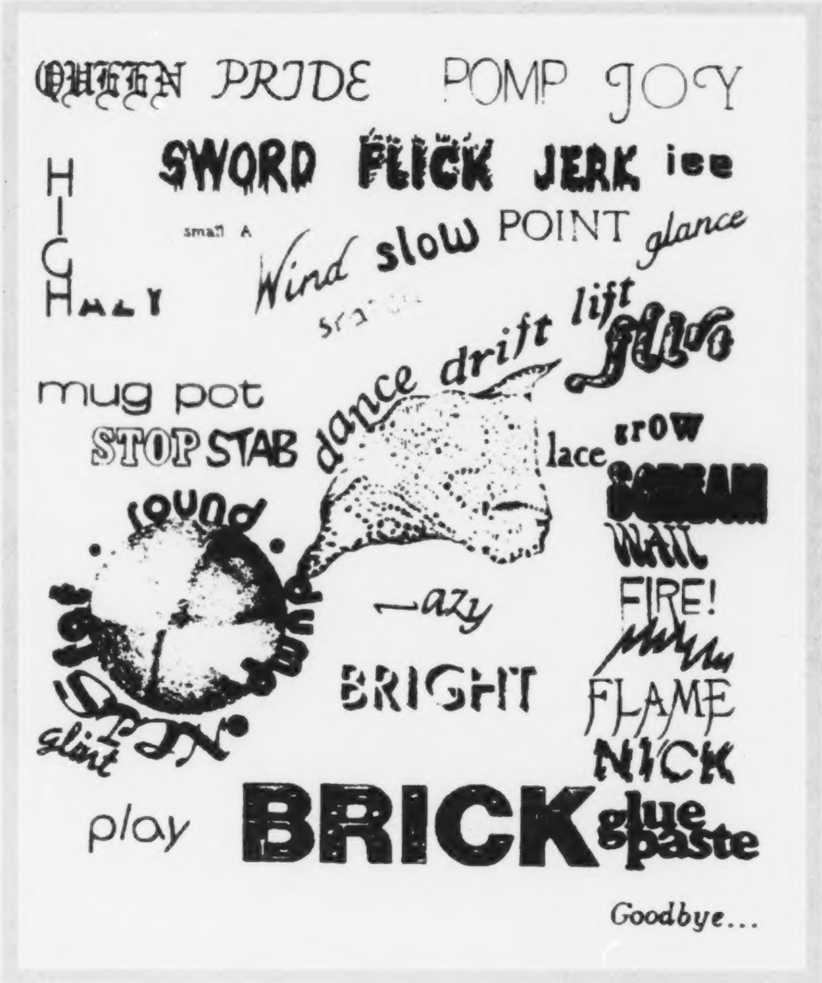
The brief homophone is meshed seamlessly within the context of Amelia Bedelia's driving lesson under the tutelage of Mr. Rogers. But not all books are able to do this so successfully.

Never Monkey With A Monkey by Sylvia Root Tester could easily double as pages from a bad workbook. Some books go too far beyond a student's experience. For example, in Fred Gwynne's *A Chocolate Moose For Dinner*, a child overhears her parents at the dinner table talk about a "gorilla war," "car pools," and "holding up a bank," and while the illustrations show the little girl's misinterpretation of the words or phrase, there is nothing to suggest the true meaning of the idioms. Readers who don't understand initially may continue to have the wrong idea about the meaning of a common expression. This book probably seems more humorous to adults than to children.

Amelia Bedelia's confusion with phrases, idioms, and homophones lets beginning readers laugh at her "foolish" errors while reinforcing and broadening their own understanding.

Mrs. Toggle and her primary-grade classroom seem to be a more modern interpretation of Amelia Bedelia. Mrs. Toggle usually becomes involved in dilemmas because she has not listened carefully to the exact wording. Her misunderstanding is usually compounded by other adults in the school, such as Mrs. Schott, the school nurse, Mr. Stickler, the principal, and Mr. Paige, the librarian. In both *Mrs. Toggle's Zipper* and *Mrs. Toggle and the Dinosaur*, it is Mr. Abel, the custodian, who solves the problem with common sense, everyday practicality and a word to the wise.

Students can begin to expand their vocabularies as they become more and more familiar with literature. Beginning readers may not be able to read all of the words in the more advanced picture books, but when the teacher reads these books to them, they can learn about unfamiliar situations. Alexandra Day, most famous for her wordless books about Carl the dog, has created two animal characters: Frank, a bear, and Ernest, an elephant. They learn to interpret, understand, and use terms specific to a restaurant, a baseball game, and a trip on an eighteen wheeler. All of the books, *Frank and Ernest*, *Frank and Ernest Play Ball*, and *Frank and Ernest: On the Road* incorporate the terms naturally within the context of the story. While helping Mrs. Miller run the diner and working as counter help and cook, Frank and Ernest take the customers' orders, "A hot dog with ketchup for Jimmy, and a serving of Jell-O for me, if you please," and change it into "Paint a bow-wow red, Frank, and I need a nervous pudding." While driving a truck, they plan to "stop at this oasis and put on the feed bags" and enjoy "a cup of road tar." The illustrations show them parked at a roadside restaurant having a meal and a cup of coffee. These same words are also set off from the text in a boxed frame and listed glossary-style on the front and back end covers.



Kathleen Schurr and Patricia MacCarthy both use the animal kingdom to guide readers through various terms. Schurr shows the parent and baby names of animals in *Cats Have Kittens — Do Gloves Have Mittens?* MacCarthy explains the correct term for a collection of things or group of animals in *Animals Galore!* and *Herds of Words*.

To help students understand common idioms like "every cloud has a silver lining," or "he who hesitates is lost," Betty Fraser has gathered a collection of expressions in *First Things First* that show children in common, everyday experiences that illustrate sayings such as: "Birds of a feather flock together," "Too many cooks spoil the broth," or "The early bird gets the worm."

As students are exposed to literature that develops and promotes complex word use, hopefully they'll feel confident about trying to incorporate more varied words into their own style of writing. Some students do this more naturally, quickly, and easily than others. They're the lucky ones — they'll probably always somewhat unconsciously read and absorb style, language, and usage of words and be able to reconfigure and develop it in their own writing. But other students may feel more at ease when they have a model to copy or an example to imitate. There are now several picture books or beginning readers that invite students to do just that.

Hippopotamus Hunt by Bernard Most uses the old word-search idea of taking a word apart to make new words. From "hippopotamus" each of the words in brackets can be found as the story unfolds. The hippo and hunters find a [map] which leads them [south]. When the hippo got stuck in mud the hunters [push] him [out] and then clean him [up] with [mop] and [soap]. As they continue their search along the [path] they come to a [hut] where the [most] words can always be found — the library.

Catherine Hepworth with her alphabet book, *Antics!* does the opposite of Bernard Most. Rather than find smaller or other words from a large word, she takes a "little" word, such as "ant" and then places it within a larger word, such as flamboy*ant*, quar*ant*ine, vigil*ant*es and has ants (the insects) illustrate and interpret the term.

All Aboard Overnight by Betsy and Giulio Maestro encourages readers to build compound words by describing the sights, sounds, and experiences while on a train. The characters in the story check the *timetable* for departures as they board the train with their *suitcases*. They wave through the *windowpane* as the train departs from the station and watch as the *countryside* passes by. Besides the words used in the text, the authors also provide a list of compound words that can be found scattered through the illustrations.

Another delightful book, *When Bluebell Sang* by Lisa Campbell Ernst, the story of Bluebell the cow's rise to fame with her remarkable singing, also emphasizes compound words like *tiptoe, dressmaker, newspaper,* and *homesick.*

Ruth Heller has authored a series of books that all promote language usage. The books are colorful, have a readable, rhythmic text and introduce the use of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs in an informal way. The parts of speech have never been portrayed more attractively and brightly. For example in *Up, Up and Away: A Book About Adverbs,* Heller explains, then shows

ADVERBS work terrifically
when answering specifically...
"How?"
"How often?"
"When?"
and "Where?"

then shows

Penguins all dress DECENTLY.
Toe dancers practice FREQUENTLY.
This house was painted RECENTLY...
and small green frogs live THERE.

She cautions, still in rhyme:

Before an ADVERB
answers "when?"
it always
answers
"where?"

and then shows

This ship will sail
AWAY
TODAY.
It will not sail
TODAY
AWAY.

What an easy, clear, to-the-point explanation of a usage rule and all illustrated beautifully.

Authors of picture books are willing to introduce beginning readers to many elements of literary style. Rather than simply explaining onomatopoeic words, Dayle Ann Dodds provides numerous examples of animals, people, and machines and the sounds they make and contrasts them with quiet little bunnies in her book, *Do Bunnies Talk?*

Sheep BAAA
Trucks VA-ROOM
Big bass drums
go BOOM BOOM BOOM
Chipmunks CHATTER
Snakes HISS
Lips SMACK
when they give you a kiss
Bees BUZZZZZZ
Cows MOO
But quiet little bunnies
never do.

Although by the end of the book you have the feeling that those bunnies just may not be as quiet as you thought.

These are just some of the many ways in the primary grades to notice and observe words in literature. Hopefully, they will influence children to do so on their own while reading and writing more independently at the intermediate and secondary levels.

My favorite book, the book I reread regularly, the book that for me symbolizes how words can become cornerstones of a novel or your life, is *The Phantom Tollbooth* by Norton Juster. Milo, the book's protagonist, is like many of us; "nothing really interested him — least of all the things that should have." Milo lets words envelope him without much notice. Many students are similar to Milo with their indifference to words. They write using a minimum of effort in word selection and sentence development and avoid figurative language and elements of style. But after Milo travels through the phantom tollbooth and takes on the quest of returning the princesses Rhyme and Reason to the warring kingdoms, Milo is introduced to the power and influence words can have. King Azaz the Unabridged presents Milo with a small box to use during his mission. He explains,

> *In this box are all the words I know. Most of them you will never need, some you will use constantly, but with them you may ask all the questions which have never been answered and answer all the questions which have never been asked. All the great books of the past and the ones yet to come are made with these words. With them there is no obstacle you cannot overcome. All you must learn to do is use them well and in the right places.*

No longer then does Milo wait for words to prompt his beliefs, feelings, and actions. He is no longer a passive conduit for words — now he's the initiator of a word's selection and use. As students are exposed to, guided by, and challenged with literature in which words play a prominent part, I hope that they too, as Milo did, will note and marvel at the prominent role words play and become intrigued and adept at incorporating them into their lives, their speech, and their writing. And then, like Milo at the novel's end, "his (their) thoughts darted eagerly about as everything looked new — and worth trying."

One final note: *Word Wealth*, I'm happy to report, is still alive and well in the West Chester School District, some thirty-four years later. Is it still making some seventh grader's life miserable? More than likely it is, but it may also be the prompt that allows others to realize the wealth of knowledge, emotion, and communication that words can provide.

NWP Announces Miriam Ylvisaker Award

This year's National Writing Project Miriam Ylvisaker Award for the best *Quarterly* article written by a classroom teacher is awarded to Robert Roth for his article, "Creating Work of Their Own: Skills and Voice in an Eighth-Grade Research Project," published in the Fall, 1996 issue.

According to the judging committee, "Roth's article was an honest and vivid portrayal of both the students he teaches and his approach to teaching a long-term project. Roth engaged the reader with "snapshots" of four students in his class who reflected a wide range of skills, motivations as well as success with his project. It was just as refreshing and important to read about Carolina, who asked and answered complicated and thoughtful questions about the rebellion in Chiapas, Mexico, as to read about Anthony who 'hated projects,' resisted choosing an original topic, and ultimately did not have much success in Roth's class. Roth uses both opportunities to reflect and learn from his teaching practice, and in doing so teaches all of us well.

In addition, the article demonstrates a thoughtful and carefully considered approach to teaching writing that all teachers, not just eighth-grade research-project teachers, will find useful and refreshingly honest."

Annotated Bibliography for Kids and Teachers Who Love Words

Compiled by

CHRISTINE FACCIOLLI

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Ashton, Christina. *Words can tell.* Englewood Cliffs, N. J., Julian Messner, c. 1988. 141 pp.

Describes how the English language has evolved through history and additions from other languages and explains the background of certain words' origins.

Asimov, Isaac. *Word from the myths.* Boston, MA, Houghton Mifflin, c. 1961. 225 pp.

Describes how many words are rooted in Greek and Roman mythology and explains how the words have become a part of today's language.

Aylesworth, Jim. *Old black fly.* Illustrations by Stephen Gammell. New York, N.Y., Henry Holt and Company, c. 1992. unp. col ill

Rhyming text follows a fly through the alphabet as he lands in places only to be shooed away.

Babbit, Natalie. *The search for delicious.* New York, N.Y., Farrar, Straus & Giroux, c.1969. 167 pp. (Ariel Book)

Gaylen seeks to find the food that best defines the word delicious and avoid civil war throughout the kingdom.

Basil, Cynthia. *Breakfast in the afternoon.* Illustrated by Janet McCaffery. New York, N.Y., William Morrow and Company, c. 1979. unp. pt. col ill (Beginning Word Book)

An easy-to-read introduction to the origin and meaning of familiar compound words.

Cooper, Kay. *Why do you speak as you do?: a guide to world language.* Illustrated by Brandon Kruse. New York, N.Y., Walker and Company, c. 1992. 66 pp. col ill

Discusses how language is developed and learned and presents an overview of several languages, such as French, Japanese, and Hebrew.

Cox, Brenda S. *Who talks funny! A book about language for kids.* North Haven, CT., Shoe String Press, c. 1995. 211 pp.

Explains what languages have in common yet how they are unique to each culture, country, or area.

Cameron, Polly. *"I can't," said the ant: a second book of nonsense.* New York, N.Y., Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, c. 1961. unp. pt. col ill

The rhyming text tells the tale of how a tiny ant comes to the rescue of a fallen teapot.

Day, Alexandra. *Frank and Ernest: on the road.* New York, N.Y., Scholastic, c. 1994. unp. col ill

Animal friends, Frank and Ernest, take a temporary job driving a truck and must learn the language and CB terms used by drivers.

Day, Alexandra. *Frank and Ernest play ball.* New York, N.Y., Scholastic, c. 1990. unp. col ill

Animal pals, Frank and Ernest, become the temporary managers of a minor-league baseball team and must learn the lingo of the game.

Degen, Bruce. *Jamberry.* New York, N.Y., Harper & Row, c. 1983. unp. col ill

A little boy accompanies a bear to Berryland where together they have fun picking all types of berries. Story is told in rhyming text.

Dodds, Dayle Ann. *Do bunnies talk?* Pictures by A. Dubanevich. New York, N.Y., Harper Collins, c. 1992. unp. col ill

Introduces onomatopoeic words associated with animals, people, and machines in a rhyming text.

Duke, Kate. *The guinea pig ABC.* New York, N.Y., E. P. Dutton, c. 1983. unp. col ill

The alphabet letters are described by a word illustrated by guinea pigs.

Ernst, Lisa Campbell. *When Bluebell sang.* New York,

N.Y., Bradbury Press, c. 1989. unp. col ill

Bluebell the cow's singing talent brings her fame and fortune but she longs to return to the farm.

Everett, Percival L. *The one that got away.* Illustrated by Dirk Zimmer. New York, N.Y., Clarion Books, c. 1992. 32 pp. col ill

Three cowboys chase down and corral fanciful number "ones" in the Wild West.

Fadiman, Clifton. *Wally the wordworm.* Illustrated by Lisa Atherton. Owings Mills, MD, Stemmer House Publishers, c. 1983. 56 pp. col ill (Barbara Holdridge Book)

A bookworm with an appetite for words discovers the dictionary. Puns, puzzles, and word play is included.

Fields, Julia. *The green lion of Zion Street.* Illustrated by Jerry Pinkney. New York, N.Y., Macmillan, c. 1988. unp. col ill (Margaret K. McElderry Book)

African American children on their way to school let their imaginations go too far as they pass the stone lions guarding the entrance to the public library. Story is told in rhyme with occasional slang and colloquial grammar.

Fraser, Betty. *First things first.* New York, N.Y., Harper & Row, c. 1990. unp. col ill

An illustrated collection featuring children in everyday situations that explain some familiar proverbs.

Funk, Charles Earle and Charles Earle Funk Jr. *Horsefeathers and other curious words.* Illustrations by Tom Funk. New York, N.Y., c. 1958. 240 pp. ill

Odd and amusing stories that explain word origins and connotations. Over 600 entries.

Funk, Charles Earle. *Heavens to Betsy! and other curious sayings.* Illustrated by Tom Funk. New York, N.Y., Harper & Row, c. 1955. 244 pp. ill

Discussions of sayings derived from classical sources, historic events, frontier humor, and human frailties. Over 400 terms are listed.

Gallagher, Nora. *How to stop a sentence, and other methods of managing words.* Reading, MA, Addsion-Wesley Publishing Company, c. 1982. 47 pp. ill

A humorous explanation of the use of sixteen punctuation marks. Usage is shown in simple sentences.

Geisert, Arthur. *Pigs from A to Z.* Boston, MA, Houghton Mifflin, c. 1986. unp. ill

Seven piglets build a treehouse among a background of hidden letters of the alphabet.

Grimes, Nikki. *C is for city.* Illustrated by Pat Cummings. New York, N.Y., Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, c. 1995. unp. col ill

Rhyming text features each letter by describing in words and pictures different aspects of city life.

Gwynne, Fred. *A chocolate moose for dinner.* New York, N.Y., Simon & Schuster, c. 1976. unp. col ill

A little girl images the things her parents discuss at the dinner table, such as a chocolate moose, a gorilla war, the undertoe in the ocean.

Hague, Kathleen. *Alphabears: an ABC book.* Illustrated by Michael Hague. New York, N.Y., Holt, Rinehart and Winston, c. 1984. unp. col ill

A teddy bear introduces each letter of the alphabet and describes himself in rhyme.

Heller, Ruth. *Kites sail high: a book about verbs.* New York, N.Y., Grosset & Dunlap, c. 1989. unp. col ill

The bold and bright illustrations show verbs of all kinds and explains their use in rhyming text.

Heller, Ruth. *Many luscious lollipops: a book about adjectives.* New York, N.Y., Grosset & Dunlap, c. 1990. unp. col ill

The rhyming text with colorful illustrations presents the meaning and function of adjectives.

Heller, Ruth. *Merry-go-round: a book about nouns.* New York, N.Y., Grosset & Dunlap, c. 1988. unp. col ill

Rhymed text explains the difference between types of nouns.

Heller, Ruth. *Up, up and away: A book about adverbs.* New York, N.Y., Grosset Dunlap, c. 1991. unp. col ill

In a rhyming text double negatives, superlatives, and irregular adverbs are introduced. A continuation to the series on language usage.

Hepworth, Catherine. *Antics!: An alphabet of ants.* New York, N.Y., G. P. Putnam's Sons, c. 1992. unp. col ill

Alphabetized entries for each letter of the alphabet include "ant" somewhere in the word.

Johnson, Stephen. *Alphabet city.* New York, N.Y., Viking, c. 1995. unp. col ill

Paintings of everyday objects found throughout a city present the letters of the alphabet. A Caldecott honor book.

Johnston, Tony. *The cowboy and the black-eyed pea.* Illustrated by Warren Ludwig. New York, N.Y., G. P. Putnam's Sons, c. 1992. unp. col Ill

Cowgirl Farethee Well must find the "real cowboy, among many suitors. A western adaptation of "The princess and the pea."

Johnston, Tony. *The witch's hat.* Pictures by Margot Tomes. New York, N.Y., Putnam's Sons, C. 1984. unp. pt. col ill

A witch's hat causes problems after it falls in her brew and begins to take on other forms. A rhyming text.

Juster, Norton. *As: A surfeit of similes.* Pictures by David Small. New York, N.Y., William Morrow and Company, c. 1989. unp. ill

Explains a "simile" and gives many examples in rhyming text.

Juster, Norton. ***The phantom tollbooth.*** **Illustrations by Jules Fieffer. New York, N.Y., Random House, c. 1961. 256 pp. ill**

Milo, after driving through the phantom tollbooth, becomes involved in the return of princesses Rhyme and Reason to settle the rivalry between King Azaz of Dictionopolis and the Mathemagician.

Kellogg, Steven. ***Aster Aardvark's alphabet adventures.*** **New York, N.Y., Morrow Junior Books, c. 1987. unp. col ill**

Alliterative text to present the adventures of animals from A to Z.

Klausner, Janet. ***Talk about English: How words travel and change.*** **Illustrations by Nancy Doniger. New York, N.Y., Thomas Y. Crowell, c. 1990. 198 pp.**

Shows the development of the English language by explaining how individual words evolved through history and usage.

Kohn, Bernice. ***What a funny thing to say!.*** **New York, N.Y., Dial, c. 1974. 159 pp.**

Discusses the origins and derivation of certain words, idioms, and slang expressions of the English language.

Lyon, George Ella. ***A day at damp camp.*** **Pictures by Peter Catalanotto. New York, N.Y., Orchard Books, c. 1996. unp. col ill (Richard Johnson Book)**

Rhyming words describe the activities of best friends at summer day camp.

MacCarthy, Patricia. ***Herds of words.*** **New York, N.Y., Dial Books, c. 1991. unp. col ill**

Examples of named groups of animals, people and things are illustrated.

MacDonald, Suse. ***Alphabatics.*** **New York, N.Y., Bradbury Press, c. 1986. unp. col ill**

The letters of the alphabet are turned and twisted to become a part of a word that begins with that letter.

Maestro, Betsy and Giulo. ***All aboard overnight: a book of compound words.*** **New York, N.Y., Clarion Books, c. 1992. 32 pp. col ill**

Compound words are introduced throughout the story as a family goes on a train trip.

McMillan, Bruce. ***One sun: a book of terse verse.*** **New York, N.Y., Holiday House, c. 1990. unp. col photographs**

Fourteen two-word rhymes, along with color photographs show the fun of a small boy at the beach.

McMillan, Bruce. ***Super, super, superwords.*** **New York, N.Y., Lothrop, Lee Shepard, c. 1989. unp. col photographs**

Two school children demonstrate the three degrees of comparison; positive, comparative, and superlative.

Modesitt, Jeanne. ***The story of Z.*** **Illustrated by Lonni Sue Johnson. Saxonville, MA., Picture Book Studio, c. 1990. unp. col ill**

The letter Z, feeling unappreciated, leaves the rest of the alphabet and tries to start a new one where she'll be the leader.

Most, Bernard. ***Hippopotamus hunt.*** **New York, N.Y., Harcourt Brace & Company, c. 1994. unp. col ill**

Using letters from the word hippopotamus to make new words five children search the jungle and find their way to the library.

Parish, Herman. ***Good driving, Amelia Bedelia.*** **Pictures by Lynn Sweat. New York, N.Y., Greenwillow Books, c. 1995. 40 pp. col ill**

When Mr. Rogers takes Amelia Bedelia out to practice her driving her literal interpretations cause some problems.

Parish, Peggy. The Amelia Bedilia series, including ***Amelia Bedelia; Amelia Bedelia and the surprise shower; Amelia Bedelia goes camping; Amelia Bedelia's family album; Come back, Amelia Bedelia; Good work, Amelia Bedelia; Merry Christmas. Amelia Bedelia; Play ball, Amelia Bedelia; Teach us, Amelia Bedelia; Thank you, Amelia Bedelia.*** **Various illustrators and publishers.**

This series is based upon humorous situations that result from young Amelia's literal interpretations of English colloquialisms.

Pulver, Robin. ***Mrs. Toggle and the dinosaur.*** **Illustrated by R W. Ally. New York, N.Y., Four Winds Press, c. 1991. unp. col ill**

Mrs. Toggle and her primary class mistakenly expect a new student joining the class will be a dinosaur.

Pulver, Robin. ***Mrs. Toggle's zipper.*** **Illustrated by R W. Ally. New York, N.Y., Four Winds Press, c. 1990. unp. col ill**

Primary grade teacher Mrs. Toggle is trapped in her winter coat when the zipper sticks. Everyone in the school attempts to free her. The characters' names match their occupations.

Randall, Bernice. ***When is a pig a hog? A guide to confoundingly related English words.*** **New York, N.Y., Prentice Hall, c. 1991. 328 pp.**

References words that are commonly confused; such as pig-hog, melody-tune, violin-fiddle, backdate-postdate. Arranged in dictionary style.

Sarnoff, Jane and Reynolds Ruffins. ***Words: a book about the origins of everyday words and phrases.*** **New York, N.Y., Charles Scribner's Sons, c. 1981. 64pp. index**

Traces common words and phrases of American-English throughout history.

Schurr, Cathleen. ***Cats have kittens - do gloves have mittens?*** **Illustrated by Marjorie Auerbach. New York, N.Y., Alfred & Knopf, c. 1962. unp. pt. col ill**

The rhyming text names the parent and young of many animals and compares them with objects that are big and small.

Schwartz, Alvin. ***Chin music: tall talk and other talk.*** **New York, N.Y., Lippincott, c. 1979. 127 pp. ill**

Presents examples of folk speech used in the U. S. from 1815 to 1950.

Shannon, George. ***Tomorrow's alphabet.*** **Pictures by Donald Crews. New York, N.Y., Greenwillow Books, c. 1996. unp. col ill**

With these alphabetical entries the first object suggests what it will finally become. Example: E is for campfire—tomorrow's embers.

Shaw, Nancy. ***Sheep in a jeep.*** **Illustrated by Margot Apple. Boston, MA, Houghton Mifflin, c. 1986. 32 pp. col ill**

Rhyming story of five sheep joy riding in a jeep. By the end of their trip they must advertise jeep for sale — cheap.

Shaw, Nancy. ***Sheep in a shop.*** **Illustrated by Margot Apple. Boston, MA, Houghton Mifflin c. 1991. 32 p. col ill**

Five sheep turn a local shop into a shambles as they search for a birthday gift. The story is told in rhyme.

Shaw, Nancy. ***Sheep out to eat.*** **Illustrated by Margot Apple. Boston, MA, Houghton Mifflin, c. 1992. unp. col ill**

Five sheep wreak havoc as they stop at an old fashioned tea shop for lunch. The story is told in rhyme.

Shaw, Nancy. ***Sheep take a hike.*** **Illustrated by Margot Apple. Boston, MA, Houghton Mifflin, c. 1994. unp. col ill**

Five sheep set off for a hike, get lost, and finally retrace their trail by following snagged pieces of wool. The story is told in rhyme.

Terban, Marvin. ***The dove dove: Funny homograph riddles.*** **Illustrated by Tom Huffman. New York, N.Y., Clarion, c. 1988. 64 pp. pt. col ill**

Gives readers a chance to create homographs in more than seventy riddle sentences.

Terban, Marvin. ***Eight ate: a feast of homonym riddles.*** **Illustrated by Giulio Maestro. New York, N.Y., Clarion, c. 1982. unp. col ill**

Readers have an opportunity to create homographs by solving many riddles.

Terban, Marvin. ***Guppies in tuxedos: funny eponyms.*** **Illustrated by Giulio Maestro. New York, N.Y., Clarion Books, c. 1988. 64 pp. pt. col ill bibliography index**

Explains the origins of over 100 eponyms — words derived from the names of people or places.

Terban, Marvin. ***In a pickle and other funny idioms.*** **Illustrated by Giulio Maestro. New York, N.Y., Clarion Books, c. 1983. 64 pp. pt. col ill**

Discusses the true meanings and origins of idioms and gives more than two dozen examples.

Terban, Marvin. ***Mad as a wet hen!*** **Illustrated by Giulio Maestro. NewYork, N.Y., Clarion Books, c. 1987. 64 pp. pt. col ill bibliography index**

Explains over 100 English idioms, in categories of animals, body parts, colors, feelings, food, and bats.

Terban, Marvin. ***Punching the clock: funny action idioms.*** **Illustrated by Tom Huffman. New York, N.Y., Clarion Books, c. 1990. 64 pp. pt. col ill bibliography index**

Explains about 100 idioms which mean something different from the separate words in the phrase. All have to do with some form of motion.

Terban, Marvin. ***Superdupers!: really funny real words.*** **Illustrated by Giulio Maestro. New York, N.Y., Clarion Books, c. 1989. 62 pp. pt. col ill bibliography index**

Explains the origins and meaning of over 100 unusual words, such as fuzzy-wuzzy, flip-flop, cancan.

Tester, Sylvia Root. ***Never monkey with a monkey.*** **Chicago, IL., Children's Press, c. 1977. 32 pp. pt. col ill (Using words)**

Introduces homographic homophones, words which look and sound alike but have different meanings. There is no story, just a picture illustrating the words in context.

Thomassie, Tynia. ***Feliciana Feydra LeRoux.*** **Illustrated by Cat Bowman Smith. Boston, MA, Little, Brown and Company, c. 1995. unp. col ill**

Using phrasing and words of the Cajun culture the story tells how little Feliciana sneaks away to go alligator hunting with her grandfather.

Weiss, Arm E. ***What's that you said?.*** **Illustrated by Jim Arnosky. New York, N.Y., Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, C. 1980. unp. pt. col ill (Let Me Read book)**

A beginning reader introduction to the origins of some common words.

Yorinks, Arthur. ***Whitefish Will rides again!*** **Illustrated by Mort Drucker. New York, N.Y., HarperCollins, c. 1994. unp. col ill (Michael di Capua Book)**

Whitefish Will, retired sheriff, is called back to corral Bad Bart and his gang.

Pruning Too Early:
The Thorny Issue of Grading Student Writing

by

STEPHANIE WILDER

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The tiny garden I have planted around my house grows larger in my mind as I order from winter seed catalogues, unable to resist Easter Egg Radishes and Green Envy Zinnias. In spring I squeeze new seedlings into the small space left among the herbs and perennials. All summer I tend my garden lovingly, watering and weeding, and then stepping back to admire it. Sometimes I fantasize that I am a pedestrian coming upon my garden with delight on a hot North Carolina afternoon. It is usually bursting with color, and I love it.

Imagine my horror when I receive a notice from the city one July, saying that if I don't "remove the overgrown weeds" from my yard, the city will do it and charge me for the job. My garden is "an eyesore." I rage to all my friends about the stupidity of the city inspector who can't distinguish a garden from a mess of weeds.

Before I changed my approach to grading student writing, my high school English students regarded me the same way I saw the city inspector. When papers they thought were just fine earned only a C- or worse, my students considered me some kind of idiot not to recognize the value of their work. After all, my students had spent a lot of time completing their assignments, and they thought their pieces sounded great. To my students, the grade at the end was as demoralizing as the letter from the city was to me. Many girls wiped tears from their eyes and boys launched their balled-up papers into the trash, flashing their eyes at me. If looks could kill, I would have been a dead woman years ago.

It appeared that they did not even read my carefully phrased comments, but simply scanned for the grade and reacted emotionally. I didn't think I was giving unreasonable grades, either. I'd spend hours agonizing over the grades, taking into account the rubric we had established for the assignment, the individual student's progress, and the student's effort as I perceived it. Sometimes I'd put two grades on a paper, content and mechanics, but the disappointment in the students' eyes was the same. Myopically confronted by a B+ over a C-, my students only saw the C-. I would justify their bruised feelings to myself. I'd reason that the students would not get better at writing unless I was honest about their grades. But in the cold light of dawn, I'd realize that they were not showing much progress.

My students at a competitive independent day school have a history of poor grades in English class. Some carry labels like "learning disabled" and "ADD," and most have little interest in English for whatever reason. They come to my class with bags loaded with past failures and feelings of inadequacy. To encourage my students, I offered them the opportunity to revise their papers at any time for a higher grade, but I myself have been discouraged when few papers would be resubmitted and fewer yet significantly improved.

The few changes made would often be limited to corrections of the mechanical problems I had already pointed out and halfway corrected myself. Even though I had written many suggestions for ways to restructure the papers or even suggested starting in a different place or on a different topic, the revised papers hardly differed at all from the earlier drafts. Conferences with me might have led to substantive revision, but students were often "too busy" to show up, and as a result I got to read miserable papers several times each.

When the revised paper still did not receive the coveted "A," students would often turn belligerent. "But I corrected what you said to correct! What else am I supposed to do?" My suggestion that they reread my comments didn't mollify them. I had just confirmed for them what they already "knew": they couldn't write, so why bother trying?

I was asking the same question: "Why bother trying?" I did not want to spend the rest of my teaching career meeting anger and tears every time I returned a set of papers, particularly when those emotions seemed to block student progress. I was looking for a way out. I decided to implement a portfolio assessment, an idea I had acquired several years before in the writing project. I still graded papers but now students saved them in a folder, noting strengths and weaknesses, finding patterns, and finally choosing work to be polished for portfolio submission. I was pleased with their improved commitment to the writing and the enthusiasm the portfolio seemed to create. Their choices, however, were dictated by the grades they had seen on the drafts as they worked on them. Students would say, "You gave the paper a pretty good grade, so I chose it for my portfolio."

It seemed to me that the grades were standing in the way of students' progress with their writing. Not only were the weaker students discouraged to the point where they stopped trying, but also many students relied on my grades as the standard by which they judged their own work. I knew I had to think harder about how to overcome these problems. So two years ago I tried an experiment: I decided to postpone my grading until the portfolio was completed. I continued to comment on papers, encourage revision, and urge students to meet with me for conferences. I would simply wait to grade the papers until the portfolio was complete.

When I started school that August, I bounced my idea off several colleagues and got back worried looks and cautions. Ours is a school where grades matter a great deal, and students are accustomed to knowing where they stand. Some colleagues said that students and their families would panic if they didn't see a grade at the bottom of each paper. Others wondered how much effort students would put into writing if there was no grade. We know that the only way to make sure that students do their reading is to quiz almost daily. Would they see writing as less important if it was not graded along the way?

When the revised paper still did not receive the coveted "A," students would often turn belligerent. "But I corrected what you said to correct! What else am I supposed to do?"

It took time for the students to stop leafing to the end of their papers looking for the grade. Gradually they stopped saying, "You forgot to put a grade on my paper!" The students who grumbled the longest and loudest about not seeing a grade were predictably those who had always seen excellent grades on their work. One boy wrote on his reflective letter that he did not like the new grading system at all because, "Even though I got an A in English, I was nervous about my grade all year. I wasn't sure you liked my writing and didn't know which papers to choose for my portfolio because none were graded." I guess he didn't know it, but his discomfort was my satisfaction.

The majority of the students seemed to flourish. The first change I noticed was that they actually started to read my comments and make the changes that I suggested. The kinds of comments I wrote were more global than those in the past. Instead of marking every little mechanical problem and flaw I saw (to justify the grade?), I wrote my reactions as I read. I emphasized those places where the paper really worked for me, wrote in the margin "Do you really need this part?" beside extraneous passages, and suggested ways to totally restructure a paper: "Why not start with this last paragraph and see what happens?" Often I would rave about a paragraph that contained a good, but undeveloped, thought and suggest that the writer develop that idea more or add more information about that idea.

The story of Andy illustrates that now that drafts were going ungraded, students were putting more effort into their work than ever before. Andy, a ninth grade student, built a sketchy glimpse of a character into a vivid story. The first draft of the piece was inspired by a man he had seen the previous summer in Taos. He read it to his writing group and was pleased that they responded with laughter and enjoyment. I instructed him to go back to the group and ask for their help in selecting those parts of his draft that they could visualize most clearly, and then to work those details into a first draft of a narrative featuring this character, who came to be known as Rico. He wrote a lively but rambling draft. I advised him to highlight those parts of the story that he and his group seemed to like best, cut the rest, and start the narrative with one of the most vivid passages.

In the past I would dread grading papers, procrastinating with chores that seemed pressing and more desirable, like stripping the wax off my kitchen floor and applying a fresh surface or cleaning out the basement.

The cutting was difficult. Like most writers he had fallen in love the entire work. Each time he thought he was finished, I urged him to trim just a little more. Finally, we sat together and looked at the construction of the paper. Since he has strong mechanical skills, we focused instead on varying his sentence patterns. Many of his sentences were long compound sentences and I reminded him of other possibilities. We practiced a few sentence-combining activities, and he went back to work.

Andy's final draft now jumped off the page. It begins:

> *Rico awoke, as usual, late in the morning and alone. The sun shone through the bed sheets hanging over the window. Thick smog from the street below had already begun to drift into his apartment. Rico lay in his bed, a mattress on the floor, eyes half open. With a groan he opened his eyes wider and stared at the ceiling wondering what he was going to do that day.*
>
> *It was a struggle for him to build up the strength to swing his stubby legs around and off the mattress. Finally, though, he was ready to start the day, and as he stood the rolls of fat around his gut straightened out to reveal his tattoos, and the beads of sweat that had accumulated in the folds of skin evaporated.*
>
> *Placing his hands on top of his head, Rico could feel stubble. He ran to the bathroom to inspect his scalp, and saw that after the few days he had stayed in bed, his hair and perfectly groomed goatee had given way to tangled whiskers and facial stubble.*
>
> *Taking out his dull razor, Rico frantically tried to remedy his image. The blade couldn't slice hot butter, though, much less hair, so Rico resorted to using his switchblade. He repeatedly nicked his face and the top of his head, and he placed corners of toilet paper over the raw flesh to stop the bleeding. He looked like a honey baked ham ...*

On Sunday afternoons I usually sit down with a stack of papers. In the past I would dread this activity, procrastinating with chores that seemed pressing and more desirable, like stripping the wax off my kitchen floor and applying a fresh surface or cleaning out the basement. When I was no longer confronted with the responsibility of coming up with a grade for the papers, a load seemed to be lifted from my shoulders. I still read with a pen in hand, but wrote thoughts as they occurred to me in the margins.

My remarks became more like those an editor might make to a reporter: "Refocus this paper. You're going in too many directions," or "Your thesis just doesn't work. Try again with this interesting idea in the third paragraph." In the past I had bled red ink all over the papers, but instead of helping students revise, my marks had the opposite effect. The corrections seemed to signal to the student that if he or she just fixed what I marked, the paper would be great. They didn't attempt more sweeping changes.

Once grades were postponed, students began looking at the bigger picture instead of getting stuck too soon in editing. I downplay the mechanical problems of early drafts, commenting instead on content, organization, and development of papers. Later, when that work has been done, we can focus on remaining mechanical problems.

Students have reacted positively to the comments they have found on their papers. I find, though, that they can still feel a bit wounded when the comments are not gushing with praise. Ashley, a ninth-grader, expresses this ambivalence in her reflective letter.

> *I was always frustrated when I got my papers back because you had always written so many suggestions, especially, 'Put more details in this part.' This past week as I looked them over, though, I realized you were right. My stories had great potential, but I got tired of writing them and put on a lame ending. When you are a procrastinator like me, a good ending is not as important as finishing a paper. In fourth grade I always ended my stories, 'To be continued...' I feel that most of the work in my writing folder needed 'to be continued.' I'm glad I had the chance to be able to do that.*

Without the specter of a grade to scare them, shy and weak students felt liberated to write longer pieces and to take more risks. One such student was Juliet, a Korean-speaking student with limited English. At the beginning of the year, Juliet was so shy that even her writing group couldn't hear her when she spoke. I put her in a group of very kind girls, however, and they encouraged her by listening carefully, helping her think of words when she couldn't think of them, and teaching her when to use articles. On one occasion, Juliet wrote a personal essay about her love of music. Her group pointed to places that were very clear to them, and they asked her to explain herself more thoroughly in others places. She showed me her revision and mentioned that she was thinking about putting it in her portfolio. I was impressed by the power of her images, so I suggested she rework the piece as a poem. She did so and brought me a piece that was good but had problems with structure. I reminded her that the first and last words of each line are most important, and that short lines carry more weight than long ones. She restructured her work, we reviewed it together for mechanics, and it was ready:

My friend
He doesn't speak a word
In any language of this world
Yet he makes
His presence known
When we are together.
He speaks of passion
Love
and
Hate
He suffers
It is his fate
To come to me
When I am lonely.
He makes me
Be with power crowned
Which disappears like a mist
When I leave him.

I speak through him
We combine in melody.

Graham was a senior who had given up on English years before. His work was so hard to read and understand that teachers couldn't give it a decent grade. Most of the time he didn't even bother handing a paper in, although sometimes he started a draft. It seems he would rather fail because he hadn't tried than get a D after spending time working on papers. He had a million excuses for why papers early in the year were not handed in, but when he realized I was not grading draft writing, he started showing me his work. As we sifted through his papers together, we found glorious passages. I was delighted, and he started showing me more.

"I simply believed that I was a lousy writer, so I didn't think it was worth my time to even try to revise the papers. When I didn't have my face rubbed in a low grade, I was more willing to try again with a paper."

Graham is a talented artist with an eye for detail and, as a result, an unusual and fresh view of the world. Once he gained confidence in himself as a writer and began to internalize some ideas about how to tell when a sentence or a paragraph should end, he was on his way. By the end of the first semester, one of his essays was chosen for the school literary magazine.

In "A Room Square as a Tissue Box," he writes about the day his family went to the funeral home to view the body of his dead grandfather, and "memories started flashing through my head like an out of control slide projector." Using his artist's eye, he sees the family

> *flock to the adjoining room like ducks. My family became a living smoke screen which let me catch only glimpses of the other room through the negative space their bodies did not shield. I could see a piece of wallpaper here and a picture on the wall there, but no whole images. ... When I saw the crest of my grandfather's big nose and his eyebrow and a little bit of his mouth, I turned away.*

I shared in Graham's pleasure as he found his voice and gained the self-confidence to try new ways of expressing himself. He gained a sense of when his writing worked and when it did not, and continued to write in college. In his reflective letter at the end of his senior year, Graham explained why he made progress.

> *In the past I was discouraged about my writing. I knew I wasn't stupid, but seeing all those C minuses and worse on my papers made me feel like a moron. I knew I should try harder and revise my papers, But I just didn't have the heart to look at them again after they had gotten such low grades.*

Bryan, another senior, echoes Graham's sentiments.

> *I got to the place with my writing that I would rather get an F than look at the papers again after the teacher had given them low grades. I simply believed that I was a lousy writer, so I didn't think it was worth my time to even try to revise the papers. When I didn't have my face rubbed in a low grade, I was more willing to try again with a paper.*

Now that I had relinquished the power to judge early drafts, the students' writing groups became more important to them. They began to see for themselves, and to help others see, when the writing worked and when it didn't. My grade was no longer a factor in whether or not they included a piece in their portfolios, but instead they made their own assessment of the value of each piece.

I see the change even in the quality and content of their reflective letters. When I was still grading every draft, the reflective letters were defensive. They were of the "I think you'll see that even though my paper is not as good as some people's, it's pretty good. I worked hard on it, even though you might not be able to tell that. I have been really busy this week, and really didn't have a chance to work on it." Here in North Carolina we call this kind of defensive introduction "Southern Biscuiting."

Early in the year I get letters like this one from Gary:

> *It was hard for me to start this paper. Every idea I had sounded stupid once it was written down on the page. I filled my trash can with crumpled papers and finally wrote this one. You'll probably hate it.*

Now that I wait to grade the writing, students write more introspectively and show growing confidence in their work. They talk about what they know they do well and what they still must work on. They see writing as a process, and they see themselves as writers.

Grading student work too early stifles their growth as writers. It seems to give students a false sense of closure. The work has been graded; the teacher thinks it is either good or bad; the teacher has marked the mistakes in red ink. At this point the highly motivated student corrects the mistakes and resubmits the paper, believing that the paper is now perfect. The discouraged student feels like a failure, and stows the paper in a bulging backpack if he keeps it at all. They have learned to distrust their sense of when their writing works, relying on the teacher to judge.

Because I wait to assign a grade until the revision process is complete, students consider more thoughtfully what their strengths and weaknesses are, when to get help, and what they must do themselves to polish and improve their work. I ran into two of my recent seniors this summer, both of whom took writing tests for waiver of freshman writing classes in college. One said, "I kept telling myself, 'Be brief, get to the point.' And guess what? I'm exempt from Freshman Comp.!" The other was less enthusiastic. He said, "You know how I can get carried away with details? Well, I ran out of time and couldn't go back and choose the most effective ones. I haven't heard from college yet, but I'm worried that they'll think my work rambled. I certainly do." Both boys approach writing with confidence and maturity. Both have learned to judge when their work is good and when more work is needed.

I am as proud of my students as I am of my beautiful garden. They have blossomed as writers as brightly as my red azeleas on a summer March afternoon now that I have learned to wait until the time for pruning is right.

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